Games / Anime / Multimedia

The Story on Stories • Rockin' Android • Where have all the Critters gone?

Cover 2 of 2

play®

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Blood and Gore
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Sexual Content
Strong Language
Violence

PlayStation Portable

PlayStation Network

A giant among thieves...

This month's Play began with the usual looming-holiday intentions: play a lot of games, cover a lot of games, get ready for the Christmas mayhem. A few feature ideas we've been sitting on for a while began to take shape midway through production, turning November into a bit of a themed month.

We kick things off with a review feature on Insomniac's latest and greatest action-platformer-adventure thingy (this series defies labels), called Ratchet & Clank: A Crack in Time, beginning on page 22. I've loved this series from its early days on the PlayStation 2, right around the time the idea of the critter-based game was losing a bit of traction. A Crack in Time shows that there is always room for these types of games, because they can be delightful fun in the right hands. Insomniac has proven once again their touch is golden.

In honor of the critters past and present, we bring you the Critter Special, after the Ratchet and Clank cover story, on page 29. If you are more interested in exploring the bleaker, more experimental side of gaming, shift gears and enter the dusky world of Heavy Rain, beginning on page 34. Here is a game concerned with telling a quieter, more film-like story, one in which interactive choices will have unexpected consequences. David Cage, the game's writer and director, wants to take you on a journey that is less about challenge and mechanics and more about the task of plotting.

Heavy Rain really is attempting something new with narrative interaction. This is good. This is also bad, when storytelling devices often struggle to resonate in meaningful ways. Or worse, hurt the gameplay fun. It's all complicated, this gamemaking thing. We follow up the Heavy Rain story with our introductory take on Story In Games, starting on page 42.

Heavy Rain and Ratchet & Clank: A Crack in Time are both PlayStation 3 exclusives. Both are fine reasons to own a PS3. There are many reasons to own a PlayStation 3, but the theme since its launch has been: it's too expensive, there aren't enough good games, it sucks that the controller doesn't rumble, the online space sucks too. Those first three reasons no longer exist; as for that online thing sucking—come on Sony, you're almost there!

If you continue to pledge your allegiance to Nintendo or Microsoft and just aren't convinced that a PS3 is in your future, Uncharted 2: Among Thieves would like to plead its case. You see, here is a game that tries really, really hard to tell a story that actually matters for an action game, and it succeeds big time. Has there ever been a game that has so effectively utilized genuine spectacle to get its point across? I can think of few games that come close. And it plays so well, it looks incredible, and is so smart at mixing action and adventure that it just doesn't feel like your typical game trying to be a movie. Uncharted 2 is not automatically the best game of the year, but it achieves a kind of craft that should be studied and better understood—for where it goes wrong, which is plenty; and where it goes right, which benchmarks the genre. (Heather Campbell's review is spot-on, page 58.)

A story for another day: is being transported into a "Summer Blockbuster" the best we've got for now? Uncharted 2: Among Thieves boldly pleads the case for yes. But the game I *want* is Heavy Rain. (A gentle reminder, read David Cage's interview, starting on page 36!)

~Brady Fiechter

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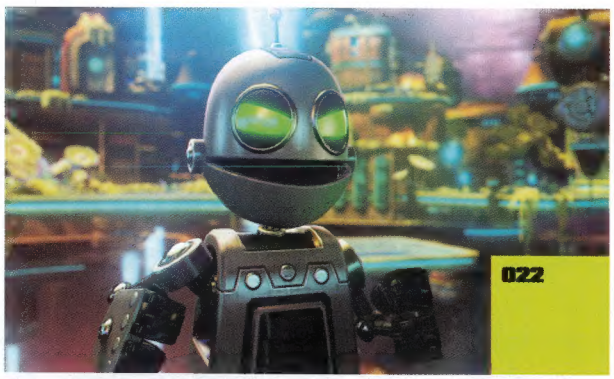
November 2009

contents

034

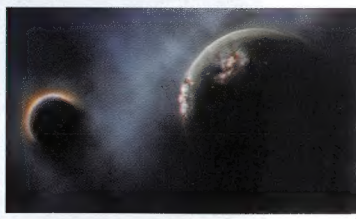
042

004 EDITORIAL
008 INK
012 DEVELOPER SOUNDOFF
014 ROMEO CHECK FAIL
016 iPHONE
018 DATABASE
022 RATCHET & CLANK: A CRACK IN TIME
028 CRITTERS FEATURE

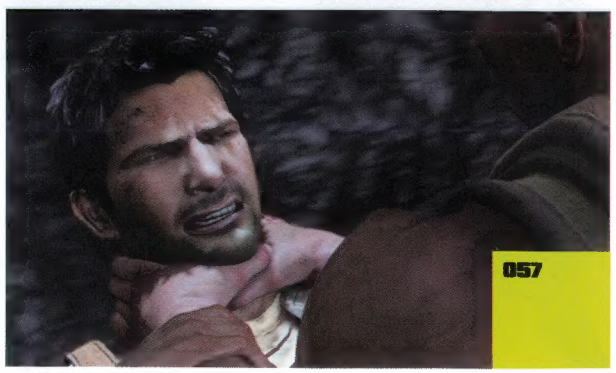


022

032 SABOTEUR
034 HEAVY RAIN
042 STORYTELLING FEATURE
048 BORDERLANDS
050 ROCKIN ANDROID COLLECTION
052 RABBIDS GO HOME
054 DEAD TO RIGHTS
056 REVIEW OPENER
057 UNCHARTED 2
062 DEMON'S SOULS
072 MOBILE
075 SOLDNER X
076 PC
082 ANIME
090 SHOP
095 BACK OF THE BOOK



052



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Special (because we can afford them) Editions

In a season notorious for peddling tin case packaging, art books and DVD extras in $70+ so-called "Special Editions," it's refreshing to see so many publishers offering more economically friendly options this year. Bethesda keeps our wallets from becoming as desolate as the Capitol Wasteland with the Fallout 3 Game of the Year Edition, which includes the award winning original title as well as all five of the previously released DLC packs, for just 60 bottle caps (or $59.99). Grand Theft Auto IV's thugs get into the giving mood, too, with Episodes from Liberty City. If you can part with $39.99 of your laundered cash, you can score both standalone DLC packs, The Lost and Damned and The Ballad of Gay Tony, in one retail package. Even Kratos is slashing prices with his Blades of Chaos, offering his two PS2 epics—remastered in HD for the PS3—at a godly $39.99. Still got some coin to spare? Check out slightly older but equally dollar-saving deals with Halo 3: ODST and Metroid Prime Trilogy. Who says special editions have to be expensive?

If you're one of the few who haven't played Fallout 3 or GoW yet, your excuse for not picking them up just got weaker with these SEs.

Who us, depressed?

A new study of gamer health, conducted by the Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Emory and Andrews Universities and published in the October issue of the American Journal of Preventative Medicine, observes a correlation between extensive videogame use, obesity, and depression.

The expectation going in was that gamers would tend to have a higher body mass index, and "a greater number of poor mental health days" than non-gamers; after studying 552 adults in and around Seattle, that assumption looks pretty much true.

Where it gets interesting is that research found that gamers tend to use videogames as a coping mechanism, to escape from their real-world problems. An apparent side effect of habitual play is obsessive compulsive behavior in regard to playing, to the point of an emotional dependency.

Far from demonize the medium, though, the study goes on to ponder about how to help people steer clear of the kind of unhealthy repetitive reinforcement that videogames tend to provide, how the "potentially positive" elements of videogames might be "harnessed", and what role videogames might ideally play in society.

As to how videogames might be used to promote mental and physical health rather than disease, more research is needed. Presumably one big step is to stop rewarding obsessive-compulsive behavior.

Killing aliens takes on new meaning

"Lose/Lose is a video-game with real life consequences..." opens the text description for the new gaming project by one Zach Gage. Once you find out what those consequences actually are, Zach comes off either as a brilliant visionary or an evil genius. Game mechanics are simple: you move around a ship, aliens come flying at you, and you can shoot them to destruction. Those aliens, however, are virtual representations of the actual files on your computer, and destroying an alien deletes its associated file from your drive. If your ships instead comes to an end, Lose/Lose itself gets deleted. It's the game that you don't dare allow yourself to play; but the game that, deep inside, you long to have the guts to try.

Bits

Nintendo named world's best company by BusinessWeek

Microsoft drops file-size limit for XBLA, indie developers are happy

Konami's Rocket Knight returns to XBLA and PSN, retro flood gates to open

DSi passes 2 million units sold, Wii drops to $199, PS3 Slim at $299 puts Sony at the top of the September charts, PSPgo part of 300 percent sales increase upon release...

Microsoft says people have changed the clothing for their avatars now over 150 million times

New Scientist reports that male testosterone levels are higher when they defeat strangers online rather than friends

Halo ODST sells 2 million copies in 24 hours

Sega's Alpha Protocol delayed till 2010

EA claims Fifa 2010 is the "fastest selling sports game ever," with over 1.7 million out the door week one, and the company's biggest European launch

A trio of top-tier talent from Bunjie Studios— Michel Bastien, Damián Isla, and Rob Stokes—recently announced their new studio, Moonshot Games, which will be focused on the download space. Yes!

iPhone/touch users have downloaded over 2 billion apps

Correction Files: Last month we said Namco Bandai North was the developer of Splatterhouse; technically it's NAMCO BANDAI Games America developing, as well as publishing.

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Gaming Gone By

File #008

words Eric L. Patterson

The Xbox Goes Live 2002

At this point, the mere thought of the Xbox 360 existing without Xbox Live is almost unthinkable. Microsoft's foray into the world of video games is now synonymous with a concentrated effort on making online console gaming bigger, better, and more widely supported. Some may forget, however, that Microsoft's Xbox platform did not always have Xbox Live as one of its biggest selling points.

Though various attempts at getting gaming consoles online (or at least connected directly via telephone lines) had been made before the Dreamcast, it was Sega's final system that truly kicked off the first concentrated push towards a serious online strategy. Out of the box, every Dreamcast was bundled with a 56k modem, one that could later be replaced with an optional (and, unfortunately, hard to obtain) broadband adapter. Finally, console gamers were able to enjoy something that PC gamers had long relished; the chance to play multiplayer titles over the internet against other people from across the country or across the globe.

However, much like PC gaming, the Dreamcast's online efforts had little overall standardization. While the basic settings for getting online were built into the Dreamcast, from there, how players connected to others, the experience that they had, and their overall online identity were totally different depending on the game and developer. Any ideas of an online "community" existed in the walled gardens of the game themselves, and making plans to join up with friends was something usually done via pre-planning outside of the Dreamcast itself.

When Microsoft decided to try their hand at the video game console market, they brought with them a more PC-based mentality, one that naturally saw online as a very important piece of the overall puzzle. Unlike Sega, who had decided that a dial-up connection was still the best technology to support, Microsoft built into every Xbox released an ethernet port, seeing the truth future of online gaming as coming via broadband. However, it wouldn't be until a year after launch that the true key to the online kingdom would appear.

Launched in November of 2002, Xbox Live was, at the time, a revolutionary idea in how to advance console gaming online. Instead of asking different publishers and developers to come up with their own technologies and ideas for connecting games together, Xbox Live was a service vbuilt directly into the Xbox that would attempt to bring better uniformity to the process as well as better tools for developers to get their games online in the first place.

For a user standpoint, however, more important (and certainly far more noticeable) was the community aspects that were now present. Via the idea of a "Gamertag," players would have one singular online persona that would function across all Xbox games, allowing friends to find one another easily no matter what game they were playing, or strangers to connect easier should they run into another player that they enjoyed competing against. Connected to this was the Xbox Live friends list, which—in a very instant messenger-like fashion—allowed you to keep track of your friends on Xbox Live, send them text messages, and talk via voice chat, as well as providing a more convenient means of joining the same game together. In addition, Xbox Live improved player matching for online games, offered Leaderboards for score competitions, as well as the means to purchase and download digital content for expanding and enriching game experiences.

Cops play Wii, criminal gets away

Police in Bartow, Florida came close to finally winning the War on Drugs but instead ended up playing with a drug dealer's Wii for nearly nine hours while in the middle of a drug raid. What sounds like an episode of *Reno 911* was actually an episode from real life.

Police already had nefarious drug dealer Michael DiFalco in custody but, just like a movie in which the criminal is caught in the first scene but his evil plan has yet to come to fruition, they were unaware that DiFalco had a motion-sensitive camera hidden in his home. For twenty minutes the police bravely looked for crates labeled "drugs" until one savvy law enforcement officer decided to fire up the dealer's Wii. Hours flew by as the police played round after round of *Wii Bowling*, jumping and shouting, bragging and smack-talking, and unwittingly becoming stars on youtube.

Evil mastermind DiFalco has yet to make a statement concerning the incident. One can't help but imagine a scene not unlike the one in *Heat* in which DeNiro and Pacino, one a cop and the other a criminal, engage in a tense verbal confrontation only to find out that, despite their destiny to hunt and be hunted by one another, they are in fact cut from the same mold. Except in this case the interrogation would focus on high scores and wiimote swinging techniques.

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Dislikes: Zombies

Name: Louis
Occupation: Systems Analyst
Preferred hiding place during the Zombie Apocalypse: Mom's house
Likes: Weekends
Dislikes: Zombies

Name: Zoey
Occupation: Student
Preferred hiding place during the Zombie Apocalypse: The Mall
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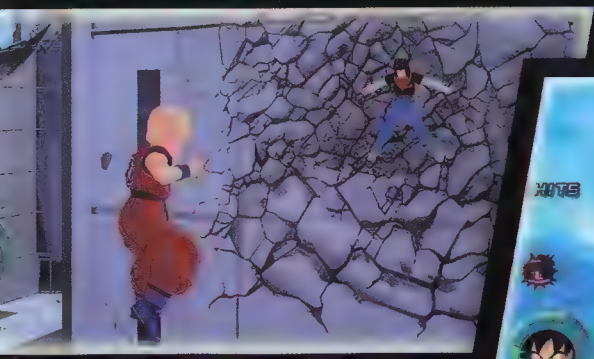

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Not only are these the wrong droids....I'm starting to think I'm not even in the market.

words Brandon Justice

A funny thing happened the other day that really got me thinking about the type of games we play. I finally had a chance to sit down with Chair Entertainment's sensational subterranean adventure, Shadow Complex, and found it kind of funny when a non-gaming friend of mine innocently inquired "so this is basically Myst in a maze, with guns and robots and stuff?"

Mind you, she doesn't play games that often, so I found it a bit funny when she made such an off-kilter comparison, but just as I was about to school her on the drastic differences between the two titles, it dawned on me:

It's not that she failed to see what makes this game such a heart-pounding, eye-popping orgasm of action and exploration—she just kinda cut through the crap and put two and two together.

Sure, the environments are different, the enemies are more active, and the color, texture, and shape of random item #3 have been changed to protect the derivative, but as much as I hate to admit it, she was pretty much spot on.

I say this because as much as developers take advantage of our industry's increased technological capabilities to help games tell better stories, we seem to be content to do so at the expense at the User's level of interactivity, and that kinda bugs me.

You see, as much as I loved Complex, the core of the game basically revolves around mashing buttons and solving occasional problems via a healthy dose of exploration in a fixed environment—but for all the random roaming, there's very little in the way of "real" danger.

In that sense, it really *is* an adventure game more than anything else and, when you stop and think about it, the trend towards an easier, more controlled gaming experience is really nothing new. Titles like Prince of Persia, Uncharted, and Assassin's Creed all got rave reviews for taking old-school concepts, prettying them up and subsequently dumbing them down.

While I'm all about the former, the question I have to ask is why was the latter *really* necessary?

I mean, can anyone out there tell me the point where healthy challenge became a bad thing in this industry? Back in the day, moving Mario or Luigi through a level used to be a real nail-biter. Making your way past a boss in Chakan was the stuff joystick jockeys were made of. Solving a puzzle in Tomb Raider was the nerd equivalent of acing final Jeopardy.

But these days?

Making a death-defying leap from rooftop to rooftop is a one-button yawn. Nuking a 4-story mech with little more than a pencil and a paperclip barely registers a blip on the difficulty radar. And come this fall, the fine folks at Nintendo will even go so far as to say that if these things are too difficult, you'll be able to press a button and let the computer get past these half-foot hurdles for you.

And while I appreciate the fact that difficulty is seen as one of the key barriers of entry for the ever-elusive "mass market," I have to wonder if we're forgetting what we're all about as an industry.

Games are supposed to be fun, yes, but at what point did someone decide that the slow, sneaky removal of a gameplay was a good thing? When did we conduct an industry-wide survey in which we decided that asking gamers to *think* was off limits? And can someone explain to me how it's cool to release a platformer where it's impossible to *die* when you miss a jump and fall into a bottomless pit?

I mean *really*.

Personally, I'm not yet at a point where these button-mashing exercises in brain-dead victory are off my gaming table, but I do find it interesting that we are so obsessed with improving accessibility and story-telling that we seem to be ignoring the fact that we're losing LEAPS when it comes to letting the gamer have an active impact on the experience.

Sure, things like seamless cut-scenes, side-bar dialog from NPCs and slick camerawork are making games look and feel better—but that doesn't mean they *play* better.

In that sense, I tend to find that the most challenging products I pick up these days are the ones that have removed artificial intelligence as their primary focus. They still do a good job of making the most of emerging technologies, but games like Madden, Pixel Junk Monsters and SOCOM are doing so in a more intriguing fashion because they're putting an emphasis on the *player* and their ability to change the outcome of the experience.

And sure, you will find yourself out-classed and out-gunned a lot more when facing real, live opponents, but at least you feel like you're actually *doing* something. I say this because win or lose, my choices in these games *matter*; my ability as a gamer makes a *difference*. Ultimately, these titles are more interesting because they actually let me lose, and what's more, they let me learn how to win while doing so.

Now, in saying that, I'm not trying to say that we should rip out our single-player roots in favor of head-to-head gaming. Nothing could be further from my mind right now. What I ***am*** saying is that I think that somewhere out there, we'll find a happy medium.

Games like Left 4 Dead, Gears of War and the upcoming Borderlands are all great examples of ways to bridge that gap, but they, too, seem too simple a solution. I openly admit that I love to experience games like this with other people, but I really wish some of these big-budget publishers would giver their devs the opportunity to make games that give gamers meaningful roles in a title beyond shooting people...or helping shoot people...or shooting people with new and unusual weapons.

Anyways, the point is simply this: I'll give you that games are getting better at doing what they do, but when even a complete novice can sit back and mock our lack of innovation, it may be time to ask ourselves if we're trying hard enough.

At what point did someone decide that the slow, sneaky removal of gameplay was a good thing?

Personally, I think we have a ton of room for growth. I also think that despite what the market is telling us right now, there has to be a place under the interactive sun where games can excel at story-telling and interactivity without pandering to people who'd rather be watching a movie or playing paintball.

So how do we get there? That is, indeed, the billion dollar question.

And while I'm not about to sit here and say that I have all the answers, we'll probably want to start by slowing our roll on things like new input devices, visual overhauls and the seamless integration of nifty narratives and start thinking about how to incorporate things like trust, betrayal, jealousy, lust, and loss in as meaningful mechanics in video games.

We need to build games that give gamers a voice, even if we don't agree with what they're saying. We need to offer them choices with actual consequences, even if they don't exactly like results. We have to start trying to provide them with a path, but build experiences that are all about how they react to what's in front of them.

Until we manage to do that, we're still just pushing buttons. Finding keys. Killing bosses. Roughly 30 years in, I'd like to think we can do better than that, don't you?

Brandon Justice pushes buttons daily as Design Director at Quick Hit sports. Feel free to push his with a healthy helping of hate mail via e-mail at bjustice@quickhit.com

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romeo_check_fail

Block 011

Cog Blocking

words Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh

The art of saying something important...

Videogames do tend to take the player for granted. They always have, though with greater complexity comes greater presumption. So over the last ten or fifteen years, as players have been asked to cope with awkward 3D perspectives, a cancer of new buttons, and greater narrative pretensions, the level of real communication going on between videogames and their players has been dwindling.

I know I make this sound all dramatic, but I wouldn't get too pessimistic or accusatory here. There are a couple of reasons for this lack of communication.

It could be that the designer thinks of the player as a mere cog in the machine. You'll see this more and more in Nintendo's games since the mid-'90s. In an effort to prevent confusing anyone under any circumstance, it's like it rarely occurs to their designers that the player may have his own ideas about interacting with the world before him.

Though it's easy to see where Nintendo's skittishness comes from—recent Zelda games have whittled the player's role down to a glorified R.O.B., the NES-era robot that, for all its pomp and convolution, existed merely to press the A or B buttons on a game pad. Other genre games (such as GameArts' RPGs or recent Castlevania installments) seem to assume the player's inherent interest; that he eats what he is fed simply because it's there. Which, to be fair, often seems to be the case.

A second problem, suffered by a bunch of these artsy games that people get all precious and defensive about—games like *Shadow of the Colossus* and *killer7* that try so hard to say something interesting yet that no one actually plays—is that the games are so focused on Saying Something Important that they forget to actually talk to anyone. It's like they forget that the player can't read their minds. They don't recognize the machinery—the actual game design—as anything more than scenery illustrating their brilliant vision, and so they fail to account for the implications of those game mechanics.

This is perhaps more of a noble obliviousness, as at least the games earnestly try to express themselves. Yet that is the issue: there is a difference between expression and communication.

The reason that games like *killer7* don't do well commercially isn't that people aren't interested in new perspectives; it's that they don't *implicitly* give a damn. What they want is a rewarding use of their time. If that experience happens to expand their horizons, then okay. Sure. Primarily, people just want to be treated with respect and engaged on a mildly diverting level.

The things a player cares about are generally "What should I do here?" or "What *can* I do here?" or "How do I do this?" It's all practical stuff, and fairly superficial. The player's role in any game is to *do stuff*, so the game had better make it pretty damned clear what is possible and what is constructive to do, at least on a basic level.

Any other communication is subconscious and secondary, and the game should treat it that way, as a side effect of that doing. Since that *doing* is pretty much the extent of the player's involvement with the game, it would be great if the player's every action just so happened to be as meaningful, and illuminating, as possible. That's so much more effective than, say, text boxes or cutscenes or voiceover. But we've been over this before.

Shadow of the Colossus wants to create a dissonance between action and inaction. Anything tangible the player might accomplish is, in fact, evil and unfortunate—yet if you choose to procrastinate, the world is bleak, desolate, and frankly boring. For all the game's scope, as a player, your only real options are to accept your allotted role or to turn off the console and walk away. So it's an interesting commentary on the relationship between game and player as a matter of fate versus free will.

The game has some damned cool things to express. Unfortunately, it seems unsure how to communicate them. Rather than slowly, silently leading the player to discover the game's structure and expectations, it overloads the player with portentous and confusing top-loaded directions that misrepresent the game's message.

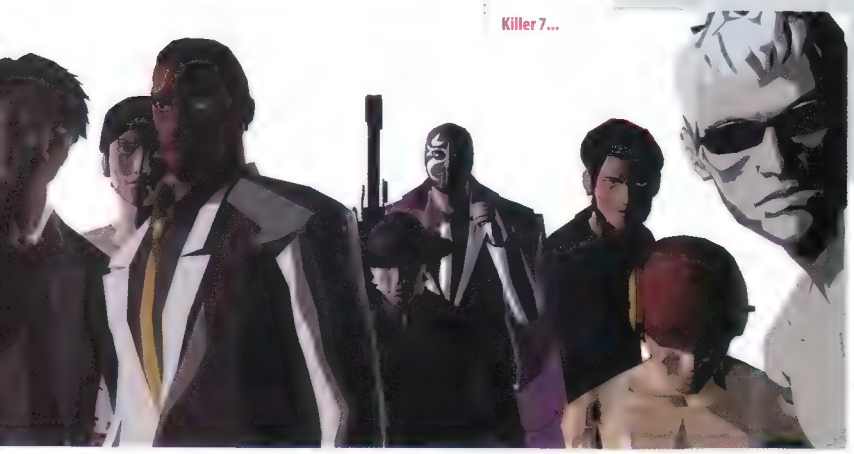
If the game is just a matter of riding from point A to point B and beating monster C, then why all this boring, empty wasteland between the points? What's the point of this sword beam thing? Why does the game make it so hard to get to each of the monsters? If the game is going to constantly display which item you're using, why doesn't it hand out more equipment? And from the other perspective, if the game is all about free will, then why is every Colossus a tacky videogame puzzle with exactly one pre-programmed solution rather than a challenge in free thinking?

Shadow of the Colossus

The oversights aren't malicious or especially dumb, The game just doesn't always seem aware of when it falls into familiar tropes, and what expectations they create in the player. And that obliviousness gets in the way of one of the more gently brilliant game concepts around, making it quite difficult to understand the game's appeal. Thus the game has limited its audience to those few people with the patience and energy to stick with it and interpret what the game wants of them, and to forgive it all its inarticulate mumbles.

This lack of communication also ages games prematurely. For all their genius in some respects, today it is hard to play *The Goonies II* or *Simon's Quest*—both a few years younger than *Super Mario Bros.* Some of their fundamental assumptions no longer apply to a modern audience, which leaves the player confused and alienated. Trying to figure out where to go in *Phantasy Star II* is like watching an old movie full of period slang, or making sense of some Shakespearean puns. Sure, with a good performance or a FAQ you can get the gist of what's going on, but it's always a little awkward.

Basically, so long as a game communicates all it's got to say through the player's own actions, it's good to go. It's unlikely to alienate anyone. It's unlikely to get particularly dates. And in theory you've got the basic language to explore any kind of wacky emotions or ideas you can dream up. The only problem is figuring out the right words. play



Killer 7...

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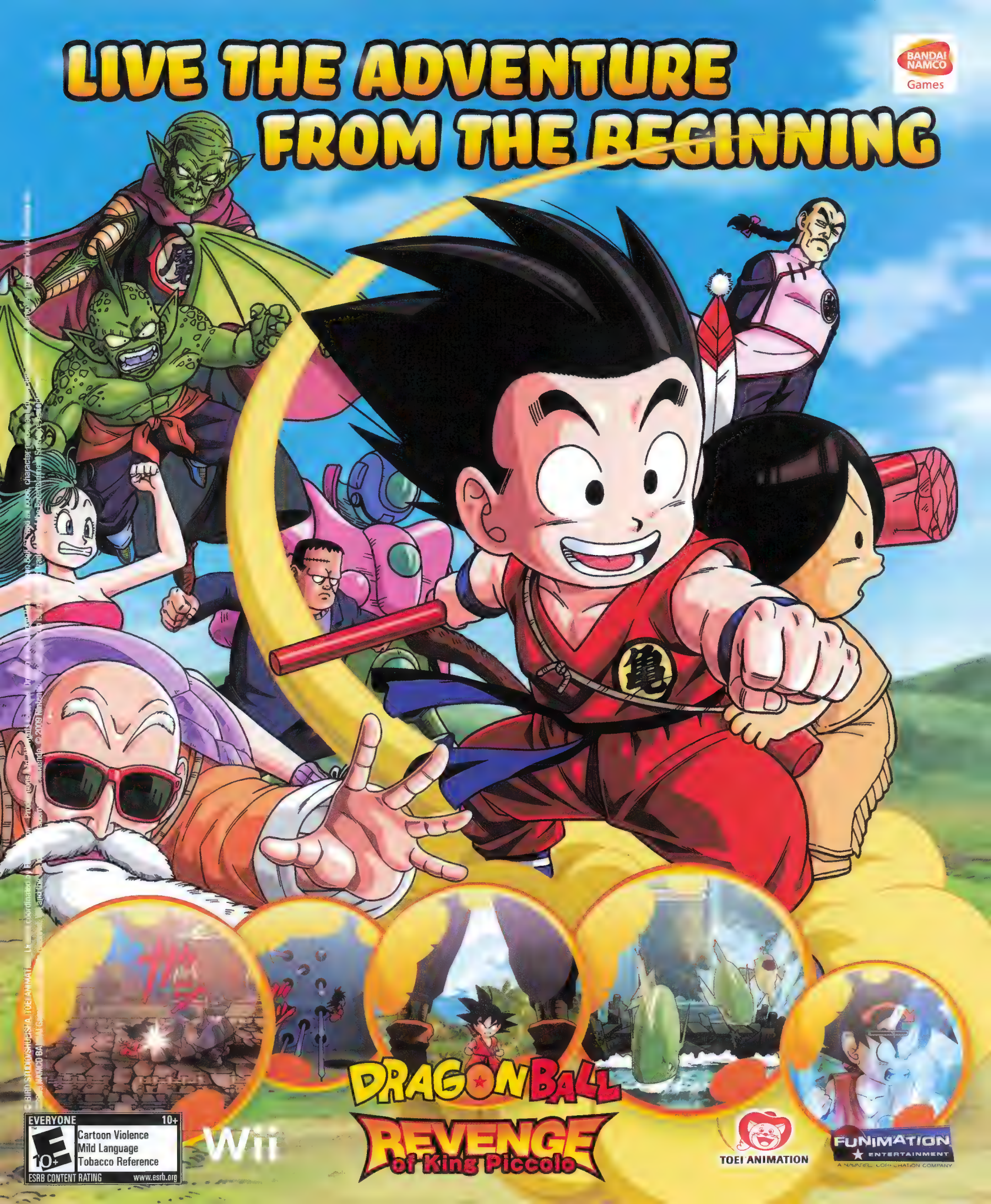

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Wii

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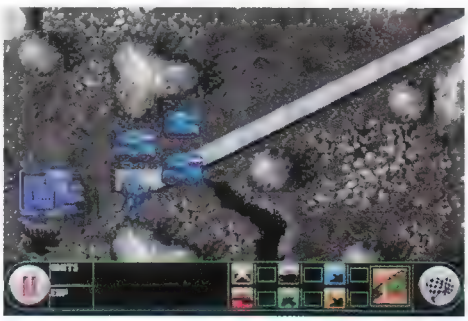
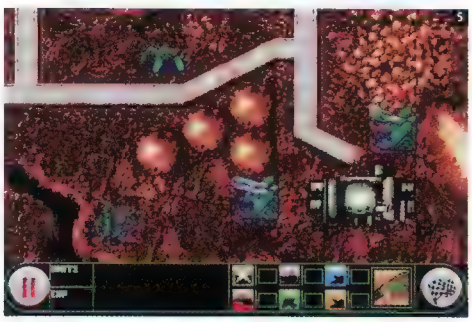
iPhone GAMING

words Evan Shamoon

On the Hudson

The iPhone continues to be the first mobile phone platform fully embraced by major game publishers. Now Bomberman purveyor Hudson Entertainment has announced that it will be bringing Military Madness: Neo Nectaris, a version of its classic hex-based strategy game, to the device this fall. The iPhone game is based on the 1994 PC Engine CD-Rom game, with "with updated visuals, re-imagined cutscenes, and full touch screen gameplay." Also on Hudson's iPhone agenda is Aqua Forest 2, and an action RPG/strategy title based on an original franchise called Knights of the Phantom Castle.



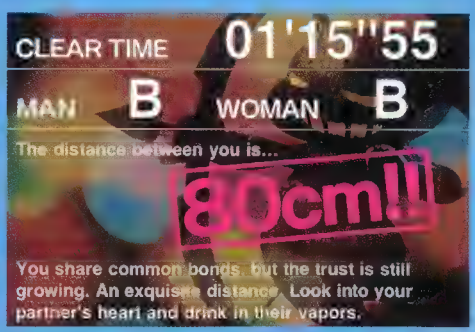


Cannibalt Run

Many games attempt to distill action movies into their bare essence, but developer Adam Saltsman goes a step further. His one-button action movie sim *Canabalt* has players leaping from one rooftop to the next in what can only be perceived as an epic chase scene. There's no context or story—just run for your life and don't slip up or you'll be kissing concrete.

Now the game is on its way to iPhone, along with Saltsman's own arcade-inspired Retro Racer Revival. Now you can take it to go_and play it while leaping across rooftops in real life! Check out the online Flash version for a taste of what to expect.

Q?Phone


CLEAR TIME 01'15"55
MAN B WOMAN B
The distance between you is...
80cm!!
You share common bonds, but the trust is still growing. An exquisite distance. Look into your partner's heart and drink in their vapors.

Physics 101

One of the most entrancing games we played this year was a little online title called Windosill, created by Patrick Smith. Essentially turning rooms into living, breathing worlds just begging to be interacted with, Windosill managed to capture the magic of gaming in the most innocuous form possible.

Now Smith is bringing his world to iPhone in the form of Levers and Acrobats, two games which the developer actually created before Windosill, and which capture the same essence. Essentially a series of balancing acts that get tougher and tougher, Levers is object-oriented fun with counter-weights of both the living and inanimate varieties.

Acrobots is perhaps less of a game, and asks the player to control a bunch of acrobatic robots as they flip and bounce off of one another, and/or give them solid ground to stand on. These are can't lose propositions; if you don't believe us, check them out for yourself.

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NPD GROUP

NOVEMBER **2009**

Industry insight from NPD analyst, Anita Frazier

Hardware

"The price cuts implemented by the PS3 and 360 hardware already made an impact on unit sales, despite having been executed fairly late in the month. It will be interesting to see the full impact of the new price points on September sales."

"All hardware systems with the exception of the PS2 realized an increase in unit sales over July. The PS3 captured the greatest increase month-over-month with unit sales boosted by 70% over July levels."

"There is a lot of speculation about Wii and whether Nintendo will take a price cut as sales ramp up with year end shopping approaching. I do think it's interesting to note that the Wii is still selling at levels comparable to what the PS2 was doing at about this point in its lifecycle."

Software

"As many predicted, Madden captured the top spot for the month, selling nearly 1.3 million units in less than one week."

"With the introduction of titles like Rock Band and Guitar Hero 5 in September, a lot of folks have inquired about the performance of these titles and the music/dance genre. While sales of this genre are down 48% year-to-date, unit sales are down much less because lower prices are playing into the dollar sales decline. It's still the third best-selling genre for the year after General Action and Shooter."

Hardware Units Aug. 2009

01	Nintendo DS	552.9K
02	Wii	277.4K
03	Xbox 360	215.4K
04	PlayStation 3	210.0K
05	PSP	140.3K
06	PlayStation 2	105.9K

NPD US VG Sales August 2009

Video Games	$1.1BN
Video Games Hardware	$395.34M
Video Games Software	$661.08M
Video Game Accessories	$117.68M

Top 10 VG Console/Portable SKU's August 2009

01	Madden Nfl 10	360	Electronic Arts
02	Wii Sports Resort W/ Wii Motion Plus	Wii	Nintendo Of America
03	Madden NFL 10	PS3	Electronic Arts
04	Batman: Arkham Asylum	360	Square Enix Inc
05	Batman: Arkham Asylum	PS3	Square Enix Inc
06	Madden NFL 10	PS2	Electronic Arts
07	Dissidia: Final Fantasy	PSP	Square Enix Inc
08	Wii Fit	Wii	Nintendo Of America
09	Mario Kart w/Wheel	Wii	Nintendo Of America
10	Fossil Fighters	NDS	Nintendo Of America

"Other Sports where Fit reached."

"The PS3 was the only platform to realize a year-over-year increase in total software sales and this is reflected in the top 10 list for the month which includes two PS3 games."

"...improved over the last several months, it's still a notable decline. The year-to-date numbers of the wall would have to be up 14% in aggregate for 2009 to come in flat in comparison to 2008 sales."

Accessories

"Accessories was the only category to experience an increase for the month of August over last year's sales. The uptick in hardware sales helps to spur sales of add-on controllers and other peripherals which help consumers enjoy their new systems."

Overall

"The industry realized its sixth consecutive month-over-month decline, and while

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gaming culture

words Evan Shamoon

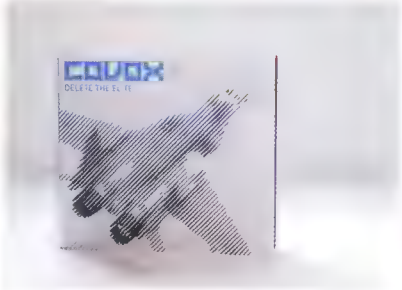
Tetris On My Mind

Rihards Rozans plays a lot of Tetris, and created this image to express just how much.

Very Attractive

If you're a fan of video game culture of the buyable variety, look no further than the cleverly URL'd attractmo.de. While selection is fairly minimal at this point, the focus is clearly on quality over quantity. Amazing large-scale prints from the likes of SUPERBROTHERS, magazines from the likes of 1-Up Megazine, and limited edition CDs from the likes of YMCK, Leeni, and the exceptional Covox. I likes, you likes, we all likes.

a++ract mode



Phoenix Write

How serious are Phoenix Wright fans? Big enough to warrant a 240-page art book celebrating its art, apparently.

Due out in October from UDON Entertainment, The Art of Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney collects all of the artwork from the three Nintendo DS Phoenix Wright titles as well as Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney, into a giant coffee table-style book.

Buddha's Telly

It's rare that you get to use the words "Buddhist" and "gaming" in the same sentence, but Trinley Dorje, 24-year-old Karmapa Lama (the only senior Buddhist leader recognized by the governments of China, India and Tibet) calls for such a juxtaposition.

Speaking to The Times of India, Dorje said that he doesn't believe his interest in videogames of the violent variety to be at odds with his Buddhist philosophy.

"I view video games as something of an emotional therapy, a mundane level of emotional therapy for me," he told the newspaper. "We all have emotions whether we're Buddhist practitioners or not, all of us have emotions, happy emotions, sad emotions, displeased emotions and we need to figure out a way to deal with them when they arise."

He goes on to say that games can be a relief, and that when he's having negative thoughts or feelings, they help him release that energy "in the context of the illusion of the game."

"The aggression that comes out in the video game satiates whatever desire I might have to express that feeling. For me, that's very skilful because when I do that I don't have to go and hit anyone over the head."

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DS

System: PS3 **Developer:** Insomniac Games **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **ESRB:** E10+ **Available:** October 27

Ratchet and Clank FUTURE A Crack in Time

Time waits for no Lombax

words Dave Halverson

CH.2

1995 and '96 were two of the most pivotal years not only for the video game trade, but for the foundation it was built on, forged by Sega and Nintendo and their respective mascots. Reeling from a string of bad business decisions on the heels of Sonic, Sega (my hardware giant of choice at the time), began to fade while at the same time Nintendo, fearful of piracy and losing control to Sony, chose to stay the course with the cartridge format, leaving the door wide open for Sony to move in and capture the crown. For a while there I was getting a little nervous. Weaned on 16-bit platformers, the majority of which featured anthropomorphic animals or exaggerated robots or humanoids, Sony's regularly scheduled mascot over in Japan never even crossed the pond, and the launch, while groundbreaking, wasn't exactly teeming with platformers. Luckily Sega was still producing enough gold over in Japan to tide me over until the Nintendo 64 and PlayStation got rolling, after which the cavalcade of critters didn't just rain…they poured.

We had assumed control. What Sonic, Mario, Donkey Kong, and Bonk had done for 16-bit, Universal Interactive's wacky orange bandicoot (whatever that was), Crash, did for 3D in '96, by urging Sony to enter the fray and at the time, Sony wasn't just playing to win, they were playing to annihilate.

At the time American game development was so far behind Japan it barely produced a blip on the radar. The UK was coming on, but aside from Crystal Dynamics, Virgin, and Interplay, American studios were the red-headed step child of the video game world order. Crash was the first game to make a splash in Japan, but Sony's master plan was only getting started. After publishing four games in the Crash series they bought Naughty Dog in 2001, and by 2002, the year Ratchet & Clank was born—which did even better in Japan than Crash, becoming the first US developed game to be bundled with a Japanese system—SCEA owned the anthropomorphic gaming space. There were plenty of others, but between Naughty Dog's Jak & Daxter, Sucker Punch's Sly Cooper, and Insomniac's Ratchet & Clank, the writing was on the wall; the PS2 was poised to follow in the PlayStation's Godzilla sized footsteps. That was only seven years or roughly three development cycles ago…

2002 was an amazing year. Maximo arrived in Q1, followed by Super Mario Sunshine, Sly Cooper, Star Fox Adventures, and Blinx: The Time Sweeper, and more like them were on the way. So when my long-time friend and colleague Brady Fiechter (ring any bells?), an Insomniac fan since Disruptor, expressed an interest in Ratchet & Clank, I was happy to hand over the keys to the Lombax. I'm more the platforming type anyway—I

After publishing four games in the Crash series, SCEA bought Naughty Dog in 2001, and by 2002 owned the anthropomorphic gaming space.

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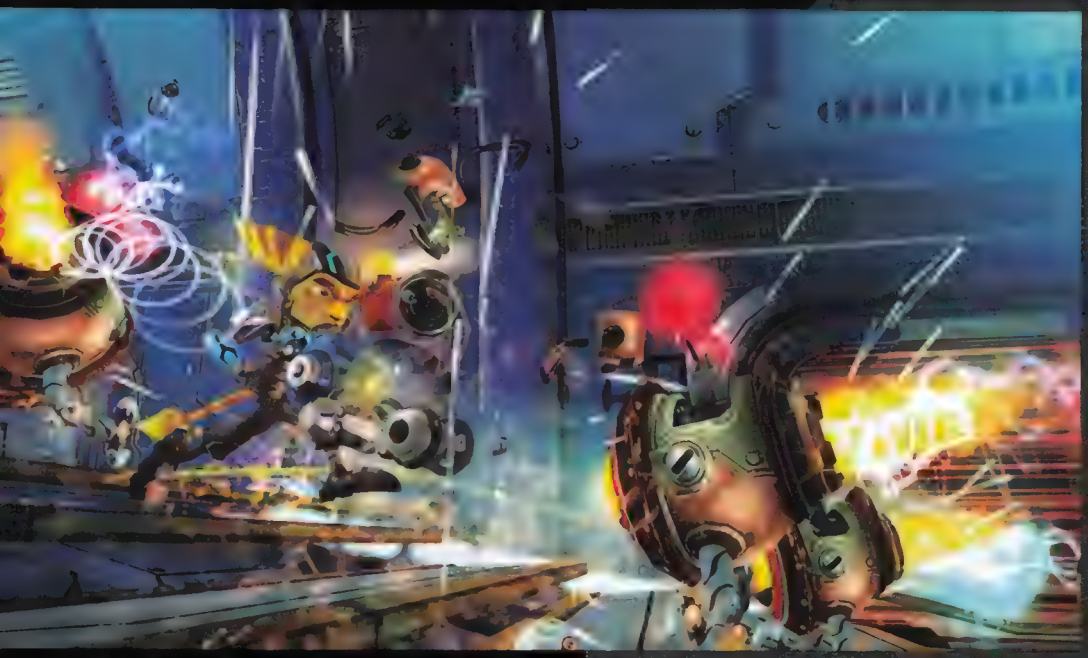
Where does he get all those wonderful toys? Grummelnet!



Unless you have a history of epilepsy or seizures you need to play A Crack in Time. Even if you've never played a Ratchet & Clank game before—Captain Qwark sees to it that you're fully briefed—just do it.

live for nasty pattern based platforming—so Ratchet's focus on weapons was somewhat lost on me. The design, however, which was even more Japanese/anime influenced than Crash, made it an absolutely requisite future undertaking. At the time dry spells came with the territory. There were always fewer games than there was time to play them. It's funny though—I don't think there's been one since.

It's a strange thing playing games for a living these over-saturated days, constantly having to set aside games that either aren't your specialty or that you just can't devote the kind of time and attention to that they deserve, like Ratchet. It wasn't so hard when games were a few hours long, but since the advent of 3D, they've been getting steadily longer. My must-play mountain, which started as a mole hill just after the Japanese Saturn hit back when there were equal amounts of Japanese releases to savor, is now approximately 10 ft. wide, six ft. high and two rows deep. And to this day I still tell myself I'm going to play every last one, from Willy Wombat to…let's see what came in today…Spore Hero. No, that's actually right up my alley. Anyway, you get the picture.

Through the years I've managed to play every Ratchet & Clank—some more than others—but it's been Brady's baby… Figures it would end up being one of the last games of its kind standing. It's only been seven years. To think that three development cycles ago fantastical creatures and platformers were still, and had always been, the driving force behind the industry almost doesn't seem real now. They only really fell from grace a few years back. Not that they've completely disappeared, but you can count the number of true next-generation critter based platformers on one hand, and two of them are Ratchet & Clank. When Tools of Destruction arrived in October '07 I felt like the kid that nabbed the golden ticket. Within a few hours I was transfixed. Not only was the gameplay superb in every way, but the visuals had a tactile, tangible quality about them, and the storyline, characters and universe overall had evolved far beyond the scope of the typical charming yet trite critter yarn I'd become accustomed to. For the most part platforming stories have always been on the incidental side; oftentimes well done but more for a laugh or tie-in than anything resembling substance. There have been a few exceptions, but precious few have taken it to the level Insomniac has taken Ratchet & Clank.

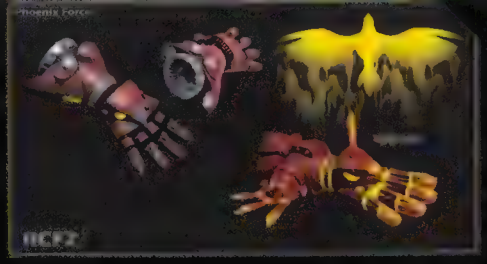
Seventeen months later, walking into this year's E3, I had zero expectations of ogling anything on Xbox 360 or PS3 bearing either fur or scales, especially from Sony. Quest for Booty was still fresh from the PSN oven and I was still messing around with Little Big Planet, as I still am, and likely to some extent will always be. Yet there was Ratchet, zipping around a massive canyon in Hoverboots, looking even better than Tools. This was either a mirage, an early prototype of a late 2010 release, or Insomniac are all vampires…

If I see Ted Price on *True Blood*, I'm changing my last name to Stackhouse because by the time you read this, Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time will either be on store shelves or on its way, as long as Qwark isn't doing the delivering. Not only has Insomniac delivered the third game in what's become the best single trilogy in platforming history, but they've done so inside of a two-year window, almost exactly one year apart. That's three drop-dead gorgeous, fully voiced next-generation action adventures brought to market, one digital, in two years. Considering a game like Tools or Time would normally take anywhere from two and a half to three years (minimum) and Booty at least 18 months, well, like I said: vampires.

Unless you have a history of epilepsy or seizures you *need* to play Ratchet & Clank: A Crack in Time. If you don't own a PS3, they're cheap now and there's a Blu-ray player in there, go get one. Even if you've never played a Ratchet & Clank game before—Captain Qwark sees to it that you're fully briefed—just do it.

Because when a studio like Insomniac does something seven times…Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, we're talking insane refinement.

When we last left Clank, he'd been robot-napped by the Zoni, perpetrated by one Doctor Nefarious, whom I hereby decree is the coolest cantankerous video game villain in the history of video game villains. Clank's been on his own before, but never like this. The first big revelation in Crack in Time is Clank. After being greeted by Sigmund, the current keeper of The Great Clock (another spectacular character), Clank not only discovers his origins, but his prime directive, which of course leads

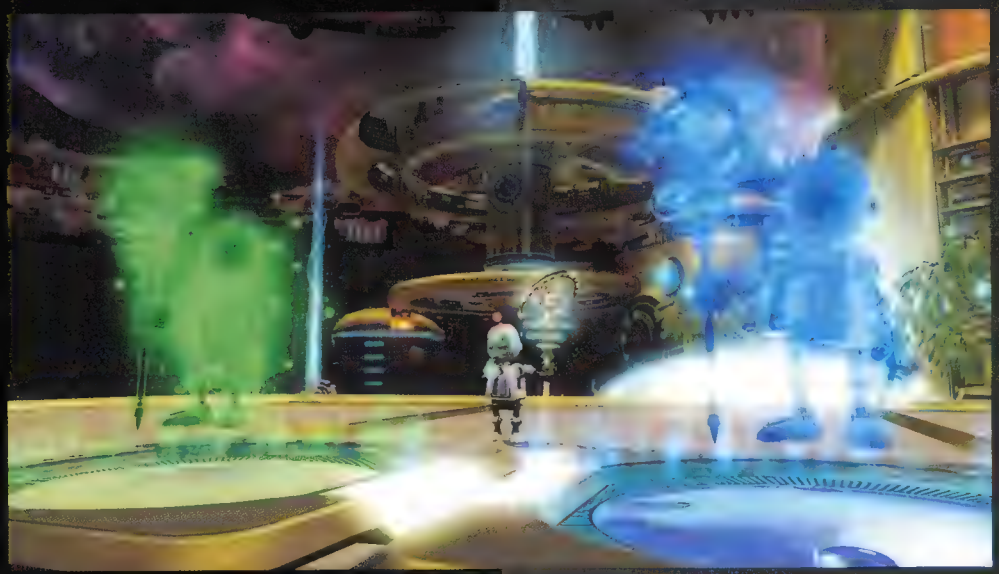


to more great gameplay. Not to downplay Clank's role in previous adventures but, wow, who knew? Truth be told I never gave Clank much thought. Beyond the obvious sidekick repartee, to me, he's a talking play mechanic, like Kazooie, but within minutes of A Crack in Time I was fully entrenched in his personal saga, which plays out in three distinctly individual sections. Within his mind's eye, where his creator imparts wisdom and training, the world around Clank is bathed in stark white, like something out of a Kubrik film. Once back in the Clock, Clank can slow time to attack his enemies in close quarters and ranged combat, mend his surroundings, or record and play back duplicate selves via Temporal Recording stages (reminiscent of Blinx: The Time Sweeper) that are simply brilliant. Clank's is an intersecting role, filled with inspired performances and gameplay, as rich and event filled as Ratchet's…well, almost.

Meanwhile, Ratchet's got a few new tricks of his own most notably Hoverboots. Acquired maybe a third of the way through the game, Hoverboots allow Ratchet to race freely around massive expanses, hitting speed markers and jumps to reach higher places. Insomniac weave the boots into many a scenario, but leave their use to our discretion otherwise, creating a completely alternate way to play each level. The weapons system has seen further refinement too…I know, like it needed it, but trust me, it's twice as cool as in Tools. For one, every weapon and upgrade thereafter is accompanied by a super cool Flash animation, courtesy of GrummelNet, the last word in blowing stuff to smithereens. As in Tools, each weapon evolves through usage, allowing you to alter and customize every weapon your way down to the color scheme, and these are some humdingers. The Super Sonic Eruptor is actually alive.

As taut as the action in Ratchet & Clank has always been, there's a level of polish applied to each separate component that resonates the whole way through, and it's a surprisingly long haul filled with massive battle sequences, arena fighting, shooting missions, Zoni collecting, rail racing, platforming, boss fighting, level endemic tactics and conundrums, and more, each the picture optimal fine-tuning, and it keeps right on going every time you board the Aphelion and take to outer space. Gliding along a horizontal plain there's a full blown shooter built into A Crack in Time that takes place between planets. Certain planets and outposts require you break through their barrier to enter, while others require a certain amount of Zoni—small sentient beings that tie into the story that like to give chase, and hang out on the moons in each galaxy. The gameplay in both the shooting stages—if you like retro-arcade shooting you're gonna have a blast—and especially on the many moons, is right up there with the core game. So much creativity has gone into every facet of this game; it's truly a testament to great technology, great ideas, and most of all great teamwork. Nine times out of 10 I ignore secondary collection based gameplay, but I literally cleaned out every galaxy in A Crack in Time; beat every shooting stage, answered and completed every distress call, and collected every Zoni. Partly because it's the only way to get the Rino 5000, but more because I was having so much fun modifying my ship and shooting my brains out. The shooting skirmishes are just too smooth and fun to resist and the characters you meet along the way, well, you'll see. I have to be careful not say too much. Safe to say that fans of the series will be a step beyond happy every step of the way.

Temporal Recording initiated: Who says you can't be in two places at once ..Try three!



Which brings me to possibly the best part of A Crack in Time: the story, cast of characters and performances. I'm not one who normally even wants a story with my platforming, beyond the usual wacky good guy/bad guy banter and related superfluity, but by the end of A Crack in Time I felt like I'd seen a Pixar or Dreamworks movie. The cinemas and everything in them are extraordinarily great and the dialogue within each stage is exceedingly well done. Not just well acted. It's well scripted, timed and choreographed, and the character design…forget it. And let us not forsake that hero among heroes, Captain Qwark. He's all over A Crack in Time, and in the rarest of form.

All things considered, A Crack in Time is an extremely special, if not profound video game. Special because it gets everything so right, and profound because it shows that critter or creature-based games can be as special as their theatrical CGI counterparts, if not more so. We didn't have that going for us before this trilogy, but now that we do... Who knows, perhaps my beloved platformers will permeate yet another epoch of technology. And if not I'll thank my lucky stars every time I harken back to my time with Insomniac's gallant little Lombax and the little robot on his back too.

Up all night with Insomniacs

Up all night with Insomniacs

Brian Allgeier, Creative Director; Todd (TJ) Fixman, Writer ; Mike Ellis, Lead Designer; Bryan Bernal, Project Manager; and Engine Director Mike Acton

play: Closing in on 10 years of Ratchet & Clank games, during which you've managed to produced seven games in the series (a superhuman feat given the scope of each adventure); was the Tools of Destruction, Quest for Booty, Crack in Time trilogy the end of Ratchet and Clank, or just the end as we know it?
Brian Allgeier, Creative Director: We never like to say "never" at Insomniac, but players will have to play the game to find out what happens to Ratchet & Clank. Throughout the course of A Crack in Time, they both discover their origin stories. As more about their pasts are revealed, both characters realize that their destinies may no longer lie on the same path. But players will have to play the game to see what happens!

(Assuming the latter) Where critter or creature based epics once reined supreme, there are precious few left in the mix, among which Ratchet and Clank stands as the prime example of how powerful the archetype can be on today's technology. How has your vision as game designers shifted in the family-friendly space, considering all the new users who weren't around in the '90s and early 2000s, versus the aging gamers who cut their teeth on games like this and count the days to the next?
Todd Fixman, Writer: As technology has improved, the industry's definitely seen a dramatic shift from games based around anthropomorphic family-friendly characters to those of hyper-realistic mature characters: grizzled marines with pithy one-liners, undead warriors with oversized swords, etc. They're interesting heroes in their own right, and probably easier for the mature male gamer to empathize with, but after a while, it all becomes extremely difficult to parse. I'm a huge fan of mature games, and even I get frustrated by the sea of sameness out there. There are a ton of innovative mature titles on the market, but often it feels like games are created using a checklist drawn up by an angst-ridden teenager: Tons of blood? *Check.* Scantily-clad heroine who insists on fighting in a bustier and high heels? *Check*. Some kind of clichéd Heaven-Hell symbolism? *Check! Check!*
The constant remark we hear about Ratchet, and the one I identify with most, is that it's accessible—not just in terms of gameplay mechanics, but in terms of audience. We're an E10+ game, but we receive letters from thousands of fans who are much older. They play Ratchet & Clank with their girlfriends, their sons, their daughters—*everyone*. The family-friendly niche may be smaller, but it's strong, and there aren't a whole lot of titles who fall into that category. That's a responsibility we take very seriously at Insomniac—providing the "Saturday Morning Cartoon" feel with the humor and imagination that kids and adults can enjoy.
Mike Ellis, Lead Designer: Throughout production we always had the focus that the game should be for everyone to enjoy. We wanted to create a game that didn't just appeal to people because of their age, gender or interests. The Ratchet and Clank series has always had an audience that ranged from hardcore players to people that don't normally play games and we wanted to ensure that we continued that tradition. I think that because we have this focus we avoid going too far in any particular direction—cute, violent, etc. and retain a mass appeal.

So when it came to designing the game we worked to ensure that there was a mixture of skill-based gameplay which would engage players looking for challenge, while ensuring that there was plenty of 'simple fun' to appeal to players that were looking more for an entertaining experience.

Critter/creature based platformers (as outmoded as that designation may be) are typically regarded as kid stuff, although they're among the most intricate and varied games around, especially nowadays. While I myself and many of my friends and colleagues consider them among the best of the current era, as a parent I'm also aware that "kids" are some wicked gamers, deplore "cute," and relish a good challenge. How much do you consider age demographics and skill level these days? Do you focus test? And if so, what, if anything, has changed since the advent of the elusive casual gamer?
Ellis: During the course of development we used focus tests, usability testing and close observation of groups of players performing complete playthroughs of the game in order to garner feedback and see where we could make the game a more player-centric experience. Every time we found trends or saw players repeatedly hit the same high points or low points we worked to emphasize the fun and smooth out the issues.

We've also worked hard to ensure that the game is enjoyable for players of all skill levels. Experienced players can play on a harder skill level, chase down macro collectibles and work at skillfully employing weapons via layering techniques or using them to their maximum effectiveness, while players looking more to experience the story, humor and sense of adventure can set the game to a lower skill level and still have fun.

There are so many dynamics at work in a typical Ratchet & Clank adventure, but by my estimation none so much as this...Pockets of heated battle among the key strongholds (such as Gimlick Valley), collecting ZONI on the many (amazing) moons, myriad platforming and Hoverboot segments, the Aphelion shooting missions within each galaxy, a wee bit of cloning antics (great segment by the way—hilarious), Clank's amazing Temporal Recording stages in the Great Clock, and of course the development and implementation of all those amazing GrummelNet weapon systems. Once the planning is done do you divide and conquer or does the entire team work on every aspect of the game?
Bryan Bernal, Project Manager: A Crack in Time is without a doubt our most ambitious R&C game ever, and we wouldn't have been able to pull it off without a structured approach to developing the game's various features and mechanics. Planning usually starts with a short prototyping and usability testing phase where our Pods (two to three person teams of developers) implement the new gameplay mechanics and attempt to find the core fun. Once we are happy with the gameplay in a prototype environment, it will then be implemented to the game by the same Pod that prototyped it. There is still some overlap where developers in other Pods may touch mechanics that they didn't implement, such as when you return to a previously completed area with a new gadget—but in general, those who are designing the levels and segments are also the ones who created and tuned the mechanics that they are based off of.

Clank's Temporal Recording stages were to me his most shining moments in the series (and just completely awesome overall); were you at all influenced by Blinx: The Time Sweeper?
Ellis: During the early stages of production we took inspiration from a variety of materials, but I don't believe that Blinx was one of them. We really wanted to give Clank's role in the game some substance and produce something that gave him an equal 'starring role' with Ratchet. Clank is a favorite character of many, and so we strove to give his sections of gameplay the same levels of quality and polish. As Clank's a thinker rather than a fighter, we chose to make his gameplay more puzzle oriented. The re-record gameplay perfectly fit in with this desire and the time-based themes of the story.

The Hoverboots really opened-up the gameplay too; in fact, I can't imagine Ratchet without them. They also have amazing potential for future installments such as open air racing or battles. Are they a component you might build on in the future?
Bernal: Funny you mention Hoverboot racing. We actually prototyped a Hoverboot racetrack early on, but it was ultimately removed because we felt that the real fun of Hoverbooting was in the parkour nature of quickly moving around complex environments utilizing various traversal mechanics, not just speed. If you're diligent, you might find the prototype race track in one of our secret levels...
A hover-jousting battle sounds like fun, but I'm unable to say if it's something we'd consider in the future.

As stunning as Tools and Booty are, Crack in Time seems to take your Trademark pristine in-game presentation that much further. I could make out individual strands of hair in Ratchet's fur, and as far as I can tell there was no texture draw or pop-in—ever; an astounding achievement given the size and complexity of the universe. Is this something you achieved internally by further mastery of the engine or a product of having spent more time unlocking the PS3's boundless potential?
Mike Acton, Engine Director: Ha! Are these my only two choices? When I look back at the changes we made to the fur rendering, it originally was not a popular change. The methods we used for fur previously were very reliable and well-understood, and it was critical to the game because it is an element central to our main character. We changed our fur rendering to a hybrid system, utilizing some of the new methods and some of the old. We did a lot of work with both lighting and performance to make sure that we hit that right balance between visual quality and cost (a principle concern in all engine/

If you're diligent, you might find the prototype race track in one of our secret levels...

visual decisions). It was definitely a big effort, but I think it's clear that the results really validate our effort here. Like the fur, with everything in this game, we wanted to concentrate our effort on just those things that would make the biggest difference to the final quality. With everything else, we wanted to make sure the rest of the team actually did have a chance to demonstrate their "further mastery of the engine" and I think that shows in what they were able to do with the visuals. So, I suppose it's a little bit of both.

There also seems to be less of the patent normal mapping we went gaga over at the dawn of the era, and more focus on the balance, sheen, and fine detail the universe has become known for. You've developed an amazing look through your textures and color palette over the years. What do you consider the single most significant stride you've been able to make visually on the PS3?

Acton: There isn't one single thing that I could point to and say "Now, that's what made the difference!" It's about balance. We look at everything we can and experiment as much as possible to find methods that are going to improve each game. At Insomniac, we're very self-critical. People definitely don't fear saying "this sucks!" about the engine or our tools. It's really that kind of feedback from inside that keeps us on our toes and forces us to continuously re-evaluate our choices. Every game is an experiment. We've learned what worked and didn't from all of our previous games on PS3 and have applied those lessons here. A lot of tweaking. A lot of changes. A few tears. Some shaken fists. But overall, the main thing has been to criticize our own work and learn from that.

For me it's the subtle touches like the wake of the Hoverboots zipping across the shallow water of Krell Canyon, showing through to the bottom when you're boosting. The lip synching is amazing too. What are you most proud of in regards to A Crack in Time's visuals?

Acton: How we manage the water interactivity and wave propagation is definitely some technology we're proud of. We've talked about it before and we've released the source code for it as part of our Nocturnal Initiative. But it was originally designed for pools of water. Small ponds, basins, that kind of thing. We spent a lot of time in pre-production discussing whether or not we could take advantage of that in this game, and how we would balance the performance issues. We decided that since we've seen how we can take advantage of large pools of water in previous Ratchet and Clank games, that we'd definitely want to use it. Krell Canyon is actually the first level I saw where water was put in the game. Long, winding rivers of water. Not a single pool in sight! But I think we were all pretty excited about the look of it, so we went to the drawing board to see how we could shoe-horn a pool water system in to a series of winding rivers. So just remember that the water you're zipping across on your Hoverboots in Krell Canyon is made from the tears and sweat of quite a few Insomniacs.

High fidelity gaming at its absolute finest. It's hard to imagine where we'll go from here...

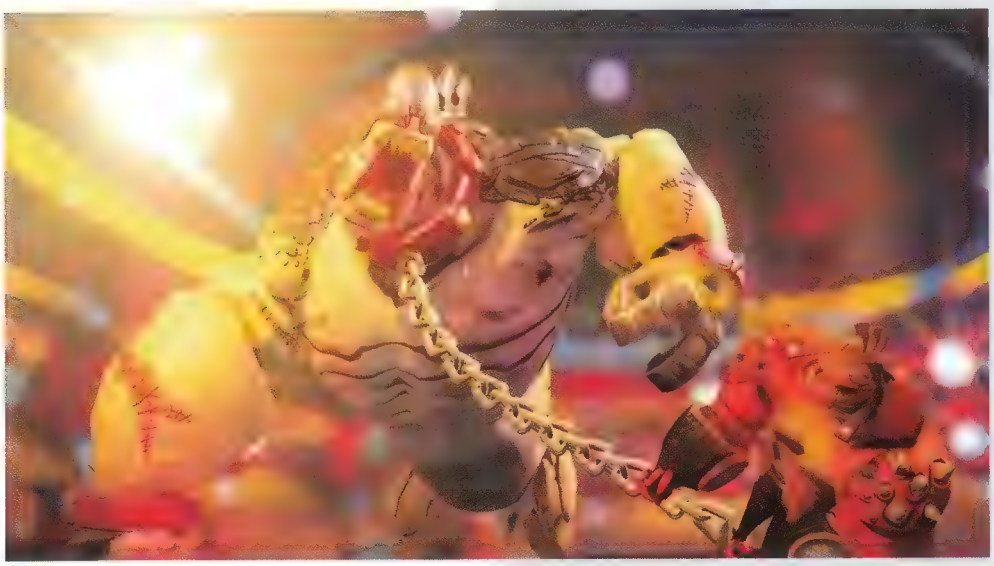
Insomniac has earned a reputation for delivering a Pixar-like experience in real-time, which, I imagine, is about the highest praise a game studio could ever hope for. It also, however, sets the bar sky high. Did you feel the pressure devising the story and cinemas for Crack in Time? I grew especially fond of Nefarious and Sigmund, although the entire cast is wonderful...Cassy, Libra, and Carina; Lawrence, the Zoni, Qwark, the Level 60 wizard with melee ability... and the writing and acting is superb throughout, more akin to a CGI blockbuster than a game actually. Each installment has somehow been better than the last. How have you managed to not only sustain but enhance the story and universe over 7 (console) games without a spin-off major reboot?

Fixman: First of all, thanks!

When Brian Allgeier and I started talking about the story for A Crack in Time, we knew a seventh adventure would be a challenge. After so many games, how do we make things different and epic? How do we pay off our fans' expectations and, at the same time, surprise them? For me, the first idea was to acknowledge that Ratchet and Clank had been around for a while, and make that a pivotal part of the story. I wanted to explore the possibility that Ratchet and Clank's relationship may have an expiration date. That may sound glum on the surface, but to me it was a beautiful idea—like when you and your childhood best friend go off to separate colleges on opposite sides of the country. Sure, you'll always be friends—but the relationship is forever changed, and you're never quite ready when it does.

We also made sure to move away from old conventions, Sigmund being the prime example. In past games we've had characters with strong shticks, but not a lot of depth. Sigmund was the first character designed more out of emotional necessity than comedic. Sure, he's wacky and skittish, but you cheer him on because we've all been there. We've all been handed a seemingly impossible job and become overwhelmed to the point where we doubt ourselves.

What it all boils down to is paying homage to our roots while looking ahead. The days of fast and loose storytelling in video games are now in the rearview mirror, and audience expectations are rising. I keep this in mind whenever I come up with a story, and make sure to give them something I think will move them. And if that doesn't work, I make Qwark do something stupid.



Most of A Crack in Time's story plays out in real-time, with cinemas for meanwhiles, flashbacks, and links to the past providing a cinematic feel while retaining pristine visuals. Given the extended lifespan of the PS3 will it be (or is it) possible this generation to deliver a seamless open-world real-time traversable universe that looks this good? If so, is it feasible, or is the actual playable Pixar movie still a generation away?

Fixman: With every game we find ways to unlock more of the PS3's potential, and with A Crack in Time I think we're definitely bleeding into animated movie territory. It's exciting for us because we're constantly discovering new ways to tell a story during gameplay. Cutscenes work great for Ratchet & Clank because of the physical humor, but in the next few years we may see it all happen during gameplay. For me, I'd love to see everything unfold without the player ever having to put down the controller.

Acton: A game is not a playable movie. Movie-magic will always be different from game-magic. But both are about fooling the audience in to believing that they're a part of this world you've created. But so long as there

is discussion about the quality of the audio-visual experience independent of the game or story experience, in either games or movies, there is still room to improve. So no, I don't think we're anywhere near ready to say that there's no room for us to improve the visuals. Not this generation. Or the next.

Do we even want that? Do you feel the comparison of games to film is applicable or ludicrous?
Fixman: Not to waffle around the answer, but I truly believe it's a split. In terms of scope and quality, games are certainly capable of going toe-to-toe with a lot of films out there. The thing that separates us is that games are meant to be an experience. At the end of a movie, the audience feels satisfied because they've watched a hero accomplish the impossible. With games, they should feel like they *are* the hero who just accomplished the impossible. This means that cutscenes can only get you so far—they can be cinematic, well-lit, and beautifully animated, but without audience participation, the experience isn't satisfying. Since that's not the case with movies, the comparison ends there.

Speaking of films, isn't it about time we saw how hot Captain Qwarks Blaster really runs? Considering the 2D renaissance taking place on (and off) the major console networks and how cool those Vid Comics were in Up Your Arsenal, have you considered taking Qwark to the next level on PSN?
Fixman: It's funny, *My Blaster Runs Hot* started off as a one-off joke I wrote for the radio feature, and it just took off. The marketing guys named our weapon contest after it, the designers created a holo-game based on it—it was a total trip. Jim Ward did such an amazing job as Qwark, it's just impossible not to laugh at him. I've since joked with Ted Price and Brian Hastings about writing a 2D side-scrolling Captain Qwark game. There are no plans to do anything now, but who knows? If the interest is there, I'd say anything's possible.
Bernal: We don't have any plans for a Captain Qwark PSN game at this point in time, but for those who are itching to get in some neo retro arcade action featuring Qwark, they should check out "My Blaster Runs Hot!" in the Agorian BattlePlex level of R&C: A Crack in Time. I think as a studio in general, our focus is and will continue to be delivering the big games and big gaming experiences that our fans have come to expect from us.

How many levels are there in his searing retro shooter *My Blaster Runs Hot* in the Battleplex Lobby? I'd have killed for that game on 5200...
Bernal: Hah, I don't think there is a hard limit on the number of levels in MBRH. I believe the highest we've ever gotten to is round 35, at which point our baby-rescuing skills were overcome by a horde of explosive kamikaze robots...

Somehow you always manage to improve on Ratchet's weapons—which, considering the gameplay revolves around them is dang impressive—but how do you improve on The Super Sonic Eruptor, Dynamo of Devastation, Spiral of Death, and Rift inducer 5000? (I have yet to procure the Rino V but I'm closing in). What's the weapon R&D/think tank like for each game? Can you describe the process for us?
Bernal: Weapon ideas come from all over the place on the Ratchet team. A lot of them start with evaluating our core technology and deciding how we can best leverage it to produce new, cool gameplay and visual effects. A good example of this is our new Constructo weapons in RCF:ACiT. Last year our Core Technology team had created a new type of shader called a "graph shader," which allowed our artists to create highly customized looks for surfaces without writing a single line of code. We utilized this same technology to give the players the ability to customize and paint their own Constructo weapon models and FX. This helped turn an otherwise mundane pistol, grenade, or shotgun into super weapons that the player could really call their own.
Other weapon ideas came from inspiration and iteration within the team itself. For example, the Sonic Eruptor started off literally as a "Subwoofer" gun that had a unique timing element to it. It was an idea from our Lead Designer, Mike Ellis. When we got to the concept art phase, Dave Guertin, our Principle Artist, thought that it might be cool to make it a beast that fires a low, subwoofer-like mating call instead of an electronic device. The team loved it, and the fusion of these two ideas is what the Sonic Eruptor became.
Some weapons are past "sacred cow" weapons that we just wouldn't feel right about leaving out of the game, such as the RYNO V. This is where it gets really tough to one up ourselves, since these weapons have been so great in past games. The RYNO V in A Crack in Time was already an insane weapon in terms of ridiculous size and visual spectacle, but that wasn't enough. When our audio engineers added Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, it was perfect.

Ratchet is that perfect title that [you] can come back and beat three or four times, and still have a great time playing.

Any idea how many weapons you've designed, including the cutting room floor?
Bernal: Good question. I don't think anyone here has totaled up the number of weapons for the franchise, but we've probably had around 100 weapons in total show up in the Insomniac-developed R&C games so far. For A Crack in Time, I think we had around 30 design ideas and a little over half of them made it into the shipped game. We also brought back some of our favorite weapons from RCF:ToD to round out Ratchet's arsenal, such as Mr. Zurkon.

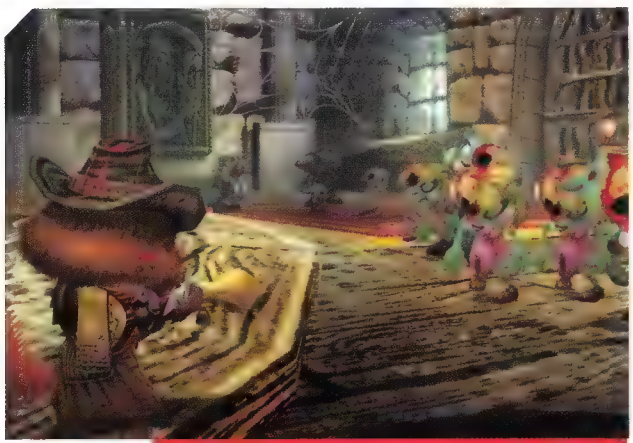
What are you most proud of overall about A Crack in Time?
Fixman: I'm probably most proud of how Alister Azimuth turned out. When we decided to give Ratchet a father figure, we knew there would be expectations. From the moment the ink dried on the script, everyone from the designers to the animators went the distance to bring him to life in a way we typically don't see in video games. Joey D'Auria, the actor who plays Azimuth, did a remarkable job portraying a warm, heroic, world-weary Lombax in need of a family just like Ratchet. It's a difficult needle to thread, but he pulled it off remarkably.
Bernal: It's tough to say since there are so many things I'm proud of with this title. It's definitely the game we wanted to make, and it's my favorite game in the franchise. Really though, I'm most proud of the replay value in a Crack in Time. For industry people, I think it's easy to see the steady stream of great games that come out every year and feel like there are so many games to play and not enough time. But there's also a big part of our fanbase who may not have the ability to play all of those games—like the kid who gets only one or two games for the holidays and replays them many times over throughout the course of the year. Ratchet is that perfect title that he or she can come back and beat three or four times, and still have a great time playing it while maxing out their stats and weapons.
I'm also proud to say that my wife loves Clank's temporal recording puzzles, which checks off a different kind of "skill point" for my life.
Ellis: Personally, it would have to be the sense of adventure and diversity that we've manage to achieve. With each generation of games that is released the investment of time and talent per polygon is increased and the quality bar is being continually raised. Because of this, many games are narrowing their focus in order to be the best at just one or two things. You'll see games that are labeled as being the 'best jungle game' or offer the 'most realistic urban driving'. With A Crack in Time we've been able to create a universe in which one minute Ratchet is using Hover Boots to blast around a desert canyon planet and the next they're Clank working to..... well let's not spoil anything.
For me the game is an interactive version of the cartoons I grew up watching as a kid. The heroes go on dynamic, exciting adventures. They visit interesting places, meet great characters and overcome dastardly villains. All while using the coolest weapons and gadgets in the galaxy! play

Where have all the critters gone?

A brief retrospective

words Dave Halverson

Back then each hardware giant's mascot game came packed right in the box...



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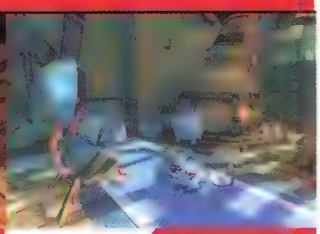

Sly Cooper

Blinx

Although my addiction to video games began with the NES, it was the Genesis/Mega Drive, SNES, TurboGrafx/PC Engine and Neo Geo that cemented it, all of which, with the exception of the Neo Geo—although one could make an argument that Magician Lord was close—had a mascot. Sega had Sonic, Nintendo had Mario, NEC had Bonk, and as far as I was concerned SNK had Blues Journey. Back then each hardware giant's mascot game came packed right in the box, oftentimes determining which console people would buy, and due to their popularity nearly every third party publisher—and there were a lot more back then—set out to make a better one. If imitation is indeed the highest form of flattery, it's no wonder Sonic, Mario and Bonk have such big heads...and why Awesome Possum's is so small. Although both Bonk and Mario resembled pseudo humans, critters were definitely the beings of choice...Frogs, Rats, Cats, Dogs, Tigers, Possums, Rabbits, Bees, Chickens, Monkeys, Apes, Alligators, Ducks, Squirrels, Lizards, Turtles...even Goldfish had games molded in their honor, some of which were actually good. In honor of this month's cover story, the upcoming Project Needlemouse, Bonk's long overdue return, and the Big Three's respective online networks providing fertile ground for a new era of niche games, here's my personal anthropomorphic pecking order... Let the fur fly!

The Greats

Earthworm Jim
Crash Bandicoot
Battletoads Zits, Pimple and Rash
Sir Tongara de Pepperouchau III (Clockwwork Knight)
Dynamite Headdy
Sonic
Blinx
Rayman
Ratchet and Clank
Donkey, Diddy and Dixie Kong
Conker
Amaterasu (Okami)
Voodoo Vince
Sly Cooper
Vectorman
Fox McCloud and Crystal (Starfox Adventure)
Banjo & Kazooie
Wonderdog

The Very Good

Robbit (Jumping Flash)
Gex
Spyro
Cool Spot
Sparkster
BUG!
TMNT
Niu Niu (Super Magnetic Neo)
Pulse man
Tin Head
Klonoa
Ristar
Sackboy
Death Jr.
Aero the Acrobat
Yoshi
Pax (Mushroom Men)

The Good

Fur Fighters
Tempo & Katy (Tempo/Super Tempo)
Atomic Robo Kid
Ty Tiger
ToeJam & Earl
Knuckles
Mighty the Armadillo
Vector the Crocodile
Espio the Chameleon
Charmy Bee
Tai-Fu
Croc
Bubsy
Vexx
Kay (Legend of Kay)
Buck Bumble
Ed (Tonic Trouble)
The Rabbids

The Bad

James Pond
Chester Cheetah
Socket
Kango the Kangaroo
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Alfred Chicken
Zool

The Ugly

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Mr Nutz
Awesome Possum

Where have all the critters gone?

Art and color by Robert Duenas

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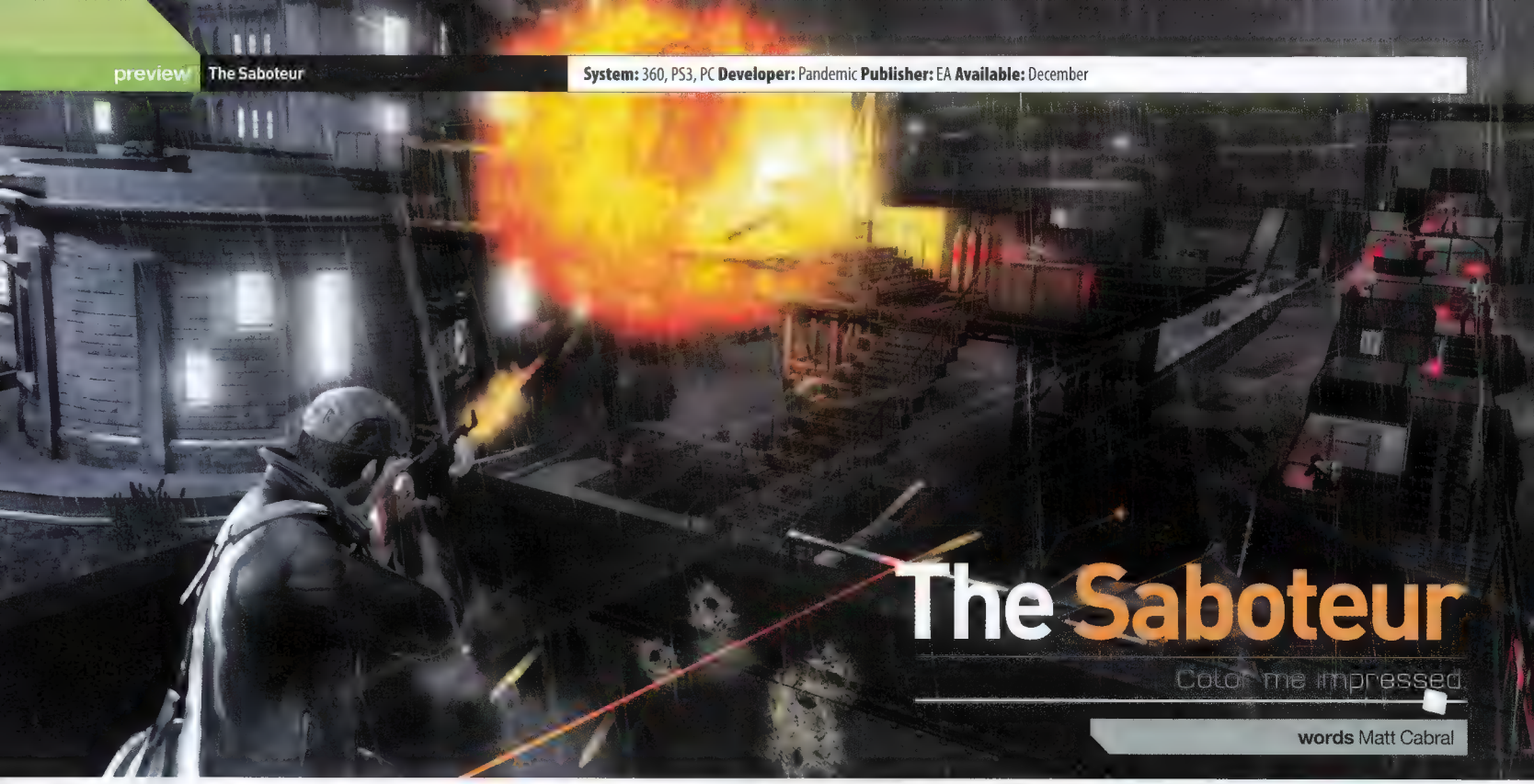
System: 360, PS3, PC **Developer:** Pandemic **Publisher:** EA **Available:** December



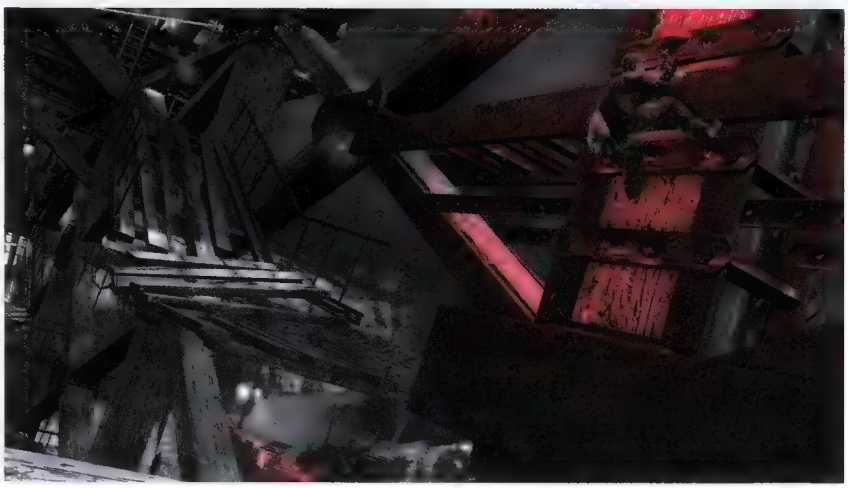
The Saboteur

Color me impressed

words Matt Cabral

One of the most promising titles of this content-cluttered fourth quarter isn t a sequel or spin-off to an already established big-budget franchise; in fact, it s probably a game that s off your radar so far. If you are familiar with Pandemic Studios The Saboteur, however, but maybe brushed it off as yet another WWII shooter or open-world-wannabe, you ll wanna give it a second look. While this potential-packed original IP does contain those familiar elements, I guarantee after plenty of hands-on time it s anything but another me-too take on these tired genres.

If you ve managed to make it past the off-putting WWII and sand-box comparisons, then you re likely aware The Saboteur possesses an artistic approach worth admiring. Many have compared it to Sin City s black-and-white style, but I actually think of Schindler s List whenever I spy the drab-to-drenched-in-color environments. As with the impacting scene in Spielberg s Holocaust epic, where a little girl s red dress is sharply contrasted against an otherwise black-and-white scene, The Sabotuer s palette switches are deeply affective. As Irish everyman protagonist, Sean Devlin, liberates the oppressed Parisians from the Third Reich who are carrying out executions in the streets the world blooms with color, displaying the player s progress, but also warning the Axis of Evil that they re f*cking with the wrong guy.



Just another day's work...

It's anything but another me-too take on these tired genres.

And it s really this latter sentiment that fuels The Saboteur s appeal as much as it s jaw-dropping visual presentation. You see, Devlin is very much a hero cut from the same cloth as John McClane and Indiana Jones; he harbors a very special hatred for the bad guys and is not above fighting dirty and giving the finger to all they stand for. So, while comparisons to heavy subject matter such as Schindler s List are appropriate for the inspiring good-to-evil visual transformations, the gameplay is much more reminiscent of summer popcorn fare like Die Hard and any of Indy s seat-of-your-pants adventures. Hell, you could even toss a call-out to Tarantino s recent revenge fantasy Inglourious Basterds into the mix.

The action-driven play is heavily slanted towards killing Nazis lots of em and using whatever means necessary to get the job done. This could mean ripping a page from Dr. Jones play-book by braining one with the butt of your rifle and disguising yourself in their uniforms and Swastika-emblazoned armbands. You can also pick sun-eclipsing zeppelins from the sky with rocket launchers, blow up railroad bridges as German-occupied cars pass over them, of course and turn enemy fuel depots into screen-stretching balls of fire. Devlin's moves are similarly cinematic. He scurries atop moving locomotives, climbs buildings with Nathan Drake-like ease, and pops in and out of cover effortlessly and without immersion-breaking button presses.

In addition to the summer movie heroics and explosive special effects, all complemented by the beautiful graphical shifts, The Saboteur weaves a wonderful narrative that s far more intimate than anything I ve seen in other free-roaming games. As the crowded holiday line-up vies for your dollars, I hope gamers make room between Halo: ODST and Modern Warfare 2 for what could turn out to be one of the season s if not the year s best. play

TEEN
T
Fantasy Violence
Mild Language
Use of Alcohol
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

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PlayStation Network XBOX 360. XBOX LIVE.

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System: PS3 **Developer:** Quantic Dream **Publisher:** SCEA **Available:** First Quarter 2010

Heavy Rain

words: David Cage

David Cage, the writer and director of Heavy Rain, has a few points he'd like to make: "I want to discover if it is possible to create an experience based on narrative and complex emotions for an adult audience using the interactive format. I want to understand if it is possible to invent a new interactive grammar not based on the traditional game paradigms but on new vocabulary. I want to know if I'm capable of writing an interactive script offering depth and meaning, and if the market is ready for that. I should have these answers and probably more when Heavy Rain will be released."

Heavy Rain is a lot of provocative talk at the moment, which is part of the impetus to not talk about it too much from my end, where speculation is begging to rear its ugly head. Cage's words alone speak of the game's progressive ambitions, and they mostly manage to reinforce a game structure that is more intriguing and complicated the more individual scenes are revealed. "Until the Cologne trade show, I really had the feeling absolutely no one had a clue what I was talking about," says Cage.

I've seen more of Heavy Rain than anyone outside the developers themselves, and I am happy to say I still don't know what Heavy Rain is about. This is part of its strength, part of the anticipation for those waiting for a game that offers to play by a new set of rules. It's not easy or fair to detail a game that is aiming to broadly toy with some very adult emotions through a long string of narrative events, designed to unravel according to your individual choices within the scene. Maybe that sounds like the familiar choose-your-own adventure scenario we are used to walking through in games like Mass Effect or Fallout 3, but it's not. Heavy Rain isn't as much concerned with the challenge of mechanics—details we're used to distilling as we preview a game—as it is with the challenge of dealing with the human condition in an interactive storytelling space.

In Heavy Rain, as you assume the role of four intertwining characters, you might die, or you might not; death is a rearranged concept in the game anyways. If a familiar scene of death occurs, it is not meant to be the final game over bell-toll, but a continuation of the narrative to the next scene, where the scenarios have now shifted. Cage likes to call Heavy Rain's progression a rubber band, where the plot bends but you never know when or where it will snap back into place. The game plays out over 70-plus discreet scenes, and the final resolution is meant to be open-ended, as you would expect from the steps you take in your personal real-world endeavors.

The story of Heavy Rain places you into a fictional east-coast world where the Origami Killer is on the loose. You journey through this oppressive mood space in real time, interacting with clues, engaging in scenes of dialogue and exploration, determining where scenes may climax through contextual quick-time cues. Let David Cage and the images on the page—images that have largely been provided for this feature as a mystery, with little to no context—fed the Heavy Rain arc carrying you to the game's final release early next year…

"Until the Cologne trade show, I really had the feeling absolutely no one had a clue what I was talking about." David Cage

play: You talk a lot about emotions. You've been on the Heavy Rain project for a few years now, have amassed a huge development team, and are closing in on the final stretch. So how are you feeling?
David Cage: Excited, definitely! The game takes shape and we see the magic appearing day after day. It is a very interesting moment where after years of obscure and hard work we start to see the experience we had in mind emerging. I chase what I call the "moments of grace," moments where something happens emotionally on the screen, and I have more surprises every day.

Art direction is absolutely key in this project, and we are now in an interesting phase where little adjustments can have an immediate and significant impact on a scene.

I also feel totally focused on the last months of the game. I know how important they are going to be to make all the final adjustments and improve the experience. Devil's in the details, and it is particularly true for this type of experience.

Last but not least, I feel glad about how things are turning. I had this idea almost four years ago, and when I look back at all the hard work that has been done, from writing the concept, convincing my team, convincing a publisher like Sony, doing this insane Babylonian production and finally creating expectation worldwide about what we were doing, I feel more than happy. There is no real pressure when you work on something you strongly believe in and get positive response from your publisher and the people who saw the game so far. Whatever happens, this moment in production will remain a very pleasant one with this strange feeling of pieces of a puzzles finally coming together.

How close has the game kept to your original design vision? Are you finding any early ambitions proving a bit unfeasible now that you've come this far?
I always have a weird feeling about my "original design vision" when I look at the final game. When I write a game design, I don't have images of the final game in my mind, I have a vision of what emotions I would like it to trigger. It is very precise and very abstract at the same time.

When the game finally comes together, I discover my game in a certain way as the result of the work of 200 people for two years, coming with their inspiration, creativity and desires.

As a result, it is most of the time very different from anything I had imagined. But it generally remains very faithful to my initial vision when it comes to the emotions it triggers, and this is the thing that matters the most to me.

I rarely found ideas that proved to be unfeasible, firstly because I try not to write anything that is impossible to create and secondly because we develop at Quantic the technology that is required to make my ideas possible. I know my team quite well, I have a good understanding of how technology works (although I am not a programmer) and we established very early on that Quantic would be "design-driven" rather than "technology-driven." Technology is extremely important in the company (it is entirely proprietary), but it serves the goal defined by the game design, it does not drive the design.

Starting with ideas allows us to push the technology in very interesting new directions that we would maybe have ignored otherwise.

Conceptually, there are a couple of things that I experimented in the first stages of the writing process, especially around the idea of procedural storytelling. I had to step back because there were still some conceptual bricks that were

When I write a game design, I don't have images of the final game in my mind...

missing. But I may come back to that at one point in a future project…

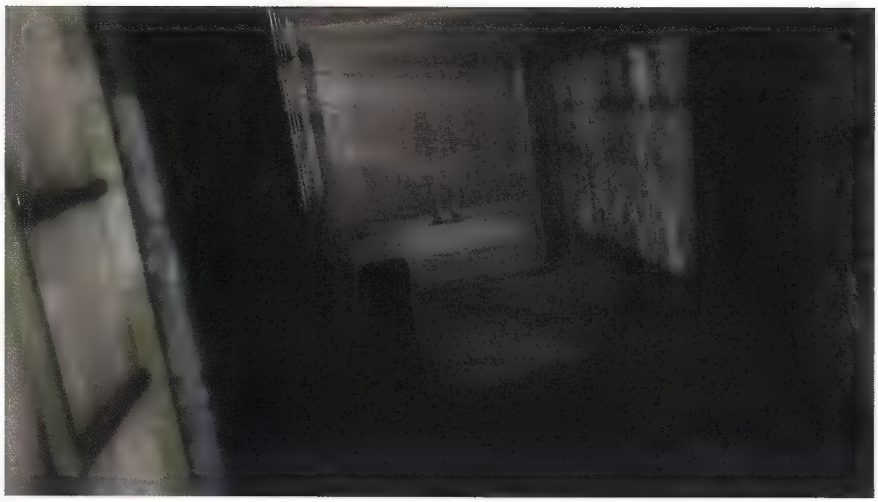
Many artists, like it or not, have moments where they question their vision. Can you point to anything you personally struggle with in bringing Heavy Rain to where you want it?
Working on a game like Heavy Rain is for me a mix of moments of enthusiasm when a scene no one believed in finally works and of deep moments of despair facing the amount of work that remains to be done. Sometimes I feel excited about the fact we do something really different, sometimes I fear no one will like it because it is different.

I believe that this strange balance is absolutely necessary to be creative. You need to reassess every morning what you are doing and why you are doing it, challenge yourself, question yourself, hope to create something great and fear to miss something important. There is also a difficult balance to be found in listening to criticism coming from your team and from outside, and ignoring them to stay faithful to your vision even when other people cannot see it yet. If you abandon too early at the first bad comment, you will never do anything original. If you don't want to hear criticisms, you may just be totally wrong and be unable to see it.

I have many examples, especially on Heavy Rain, of things no one believed in and that I intentionally ignored because my instinct told me they would become interesting. Ethan's scene we presented in Cologne was one of these scenes my team was quite dubious until the week before we presented it. There are also many cases where I was wrong and I had to listen to other people's comments. Knowing when to persist and when to listen is something that comes with experience. I believe I am better at that now than I was ten years ago… although there is still room for improvement…

Sticking to an idea and finally proving to be right is my little act of creative heroism. I like these moments where you have the feeling of seeing something others cannot see yet.

The main difficulty you face as a creator is to dare evoking subjects that are not traditional video game themes.



With all this interest in exploring more complex, substantial emotions, I'm reminded of what Miyamoto once said, that he observes the player's face and wants to see them smiling as they play. What are you ultimately gunning for?
My goal is to see an emotion on players' faces, whether it is happiness, disgust, fear or tears. The worst thing would be to see no expression at all. Most of all, I want players to forget that this is just a video game, I want them to feel immersed in what's going on on screen and believe for a second that this is real. If they feel what the characters feel, then my goal is reached.

Is it fair to say the fragile, uncertain nature of the human psyche fascinates you?
Definitely. Someone mentioned to me that all my games were about schizophrenia, about this idea of being someone else—from virtual reincarnation in Omikron to this idea of controlling four characters in Heavy Rain.

I think I see games like emotion simulators, a unique possibility to be in the shoes of someone else, to experience events and situations that will never happen to you in real life and to discover what you would do (and I guess who you really are). The more it goes, the more I am interested in characters with inner wounds, moments in their pasts that made them who they are. Super heroes are not appealing to me, because they spend their time being strong and winning over evil. I don't have anything in common with them. I want to write about characters who are fragile, vulnerable, sometimes fantastic, sometimes disappointing. In short, I want to write about human beings. This is a subject that very few video games have tried so far…

What drives you to make a game like Heavy Rain?
I want to discover if it is possible to create an experience based on narrative and complex emotions for an adult audience using the interactive format. I want to understand if it is possible to invent a new interactive grammar not based on the traditional game paradigms but on a new vocabulary. I want to know if I am capable of writing an interactive script offering depth and meaning, and if the market is ready for that. I should have these answers and probably more when Heavy Rain will be released…

One of the more important things Heavy Rain promises me is that you are making a "game for adults." Why is it so hard for games to reach for higher ground and pull away from the typical child's play? And what exactly is "adult" [to you]?
Creating an adult experience is about changing the content and the form of video games. Changing the form means trying to create an experience that is not based on shooting/jumping/driving loops but on new types of interfaces allowing a wider range of contextual actions. It also means creating an experience where the challenge is not on the controller but rather in the mind of the player. Changing the content means writing about more complex themes triggering more complex emotions. Most

games are about heroes confronted with a villain, the heroes fights hard, kills zillions of enemies but finally kills the villain and saves the world. The emotions triggered on the way are mainly stress, excitement, anger, frustration, competition.

Working for an adult audience requires to tell more complex stories using believable characters and a wider palette of emotions including empathy or sadness. The main difficulty you face as a creator is to dare evoking subjects that are not traditional video game themes. It sounds bizarre to say that, but try to think of a game talking about rape, homosexuality, euthanasia, anorexia, physical handicap, or even how it feels to cheat on your wife or not to have the courage to face your responsibilities. All these subjects are very complex and sensitive, some amazing books or movies have been made about them. Thinking of a video game about these is somehow shocking. Why? Just because games are perceived as toys for kids, and kids should not be involved in these matters. But if you consider interactivity like a creative platform like theatre, poetry or literature, it suddenly breaks the barrier and there is no reason why you could not interact in a story based on one of these themes to understand what it feels like. It is not about "having fun," it is about being someone else, having to face new situations. Ultimately, I believe it can truly help people to understand better each other.

Heavy Rain is just the first step in this new direction. It explores what it really means to love someone. It is going to be a very shocking game for some, not because it will be vulgar or gory, but because it dares to explore areas where very few games have before. I see myself as an author working on a creative platform. Whatever serves my story is acceptable for me with no limit. I refuse to consider that doing or showing something is not right for a game if it would be logical to do in a movie or a book. I respect this medium and I believe that it is time to get rid of preconceived ideas and show there is much more to do with interactivity than what we have done so far.

You say you are not interested in making toys. I know some high profile gamemakers who argue games really shouldn't be, aren't

capable of being, more than toys.
When cinema appeared, many people thought it would never be more than a nice attraction for kids in fairs. Who could imagine in these old days that some masterpieces would come from projecting images on a big screen of watching a train entering a station or a horse running?

I have a lot of respect for my colleagues doing great games with no other ambition than providing fun to teenagers. There have been a great market for these products and there will continue to be in the future.

But saying that interactivity cannot be more than toys is a total absurdity. It is like saying that cinema will never be more than this old movie where we see a train entering a station.

Interactivity is a medium. It has no specific nature by itself. It is what people will make of it. If only toy makers use it, they will create toys. If authors work on it, they will create masterpieces. I plead for more authors and fewer toymakers because I believe interactivity needs inspiration, meaning, ambition, courage, and of course emotion.

Every story is essentially a character on a quest. Games at their core are about quests. Is it natural that we tell stories with games, at least in some capacity?
I don't believe cinema and games mean the same thing with the word "quest." In a movie (or in literature), a quest is basically a narrative arc that the hero will go through that will deeply change him. The character is different at the end than at the beginning, and the story tells how his experience changed him and made him someone different in a way or another.

In games, a quest is usually something to do involving battles, puzzles or inventory, that character asks you to accomplish, although you don't really understand why, in order to give you a reward that will lead you to your next quest. The emotional arc is usually very limited, character's evolution too. It all comes down to accomplishing something physical to get a reward to progress to the level.

This is a very old scheme and I cannot help but jump on my couch each time I see that in a game. I've played games for twenty years and I have accomplished thousands of quests in my gamer's life, probably traveling by foot many more miles than I have in my real life. I think I have now a clear idea of the concept and I am eager for new narrative structures that will go beyond this old scheme.

A major problem I see with the way we try and tell stories with games is that plot structure always breaks down once you take control of a character and create your own actions. In a sense two authors are competing to tell their own tale and have their own control. The fairly rigid, written story that the writer placed in the game seems to always struggle to connect with what the player is feeling and doing in his active space.

I disagree. There are ways to create a story that are not fixed and rigid but rather that are told in a "narrative space" where the player can be free. Boundaries can be almost invisible if the story is designed the right way. With Indigo, I made this interesting experience demoing the Diner scene, the first scene of the game: after Lucas Kane killed a stranger in the restrooms of a diner in a state of trance, I asked the audience what they wanted to do now. Some wanted to hide the body, others wanted to hide the knife, to leave the place or to hide all evidences. Many tried to find something that was not possible, but honestly no one managed to find something Lucas Kane could not do. All the technique was about creating a tight context for choices and dealing with all the possible decisions the character may want to do. This is just one of the techniques that can be used to create a narrative space for the player that allows to tell a good story while leaving controls of the narrative in the hands of the player.

We have developed and improved these techniques in Heavy Rain to merge storytelling and interactivity in a new way. I am convinced there are many other ways of doing this and I am impatient to move on my next project to explore new areas.

What is at the core to you that makes a game a game?
I don't try to make a video game. I believe there are enough people out there making fantastic video games, they don't need one more.

What I mean by "video games" is interactive experiences usually based on violence and repetitive patterns. My work is about getting rid

I don t try to make a video game. I believe enough people are out there making fantastic video games, they don't need one more.

of game play mechanics as such and replacing them with contextual actions allowing to tell a story. To give you a concrete example, the ARI sequence we showed in the scene MAD JACK is quite unique in the game. It is not one of twenty scenes where you will need to go on a crime scene, use your ARI device to find clues before the bad guy arrives and you fight him once in the mud, once in the sand, once in the grass, once in the snow… It is a specific mechanic used contextually in very few scenes to tell a specific part of the story. This is a very different approach.

I am sorry if I sound a little bit cynical about video game mechanics, but this industry is stuck in patterns as if there were no other ways of making interactive experiences. For me, it is like a novelist writing entire books based on the same scene just changing the environment. There is a life outside game patterns. It is time to discover it.

How do you maintain a risk-reward quotient in a game that's heavily cinematic based? Or is that traditional gameplay device we might think of not a concern to you?

"Risk-Reward" relates to the notion that a game should be a challenge, something that as the player I may succeed in or fail. I see Heavy Rain as a journey rather than a challenge, an experience where the player will never be stuck but will rather define his path and see how his actions have consequences. It may sound very abstract describing it, but it is possible to create an experience based on a journey and not on a challenge, and I don't believe it would be a less exciting or interesting experience.

How do you avoid a gameplay beat destroying a story beat, or vice versa? So often you are forced to watch a story play out, then you jump into a string of action, an incessant shootout or whatever the case may be. Then you jerk into the next unrelated, unbelievable moment when you're supposed to take that character seriously as a real person with real emotions.

The way video games are structured generates this type of situation. If you have defined that your gameplay is about shooting at enemies, you will need to provide many levels with different environments and different enemies. You can offer some variations, but fundamentally, the player will do the same thing through these levels. Then you will need some kind of story to link all your levels together, justify that you start in the jungle, go in the snowy mountains, killing millions of enemies on your way. Technically, storytelling is just a tool to link levels together. In this context, it cannot make miracles, because no story can justify this absurd set up.

The first thing to do if you want to change this situation is NOT to define your initial gameplay as an action loop. Instead of starting with "what can my character do?" start with "who is he?" Don't start your game design with "my character can shoot, jump on walls, crouch, hide," but rather with "my character is confronted with this situation and will have to find a solution."

Instead of starting with the means and trying to find the goal, you start with the goal and then define the means. What you discover is that the means have to be numerous and diverse, which leads you to different decisions regarding interfaces and design in general.

The right approach not to sacrifice story to gameplay or vice versa is to think about both at the same time. Each scene should be contextual, and offer a strong proposition for storytelling AND gameplay. One should always support the other.

Interactivity has been defined so far by the fact of destroying something or killing someone, but there are many other ways of interacting that are just as interesting if not more. The objective of creative people in this industry in the coming years should be to discover new ways of interacting and how it can create new types of experiences. We explore one area with Heavy Rain, but there are many others in very different directions, like Flower's for example.

There are arguments that it's time to stop emulating filmmaking and go deeper into making better and more interesting mechanic-driven games. Are maybe both arguments valid, and it comes down to what kind of experience you're trying to create for the player?

Some people are naïve enough to believe that games can invent themselves from scratch. When cinema was invented, it borrowed most of its initial visual grammar from photography and painting, before adding its own vocabulary and affirming its own identity. When photography was invented, it borrowed its visual grammar from painting. When games were invented, most of their visual grammar came from B-movies. There is nothing wrong with that, as long as we add to what we borrowed. I don't have any problem using visual rules validated by a century of cinema, as I believe it works well in most cases. But as I work on a different medium that is interactive in nature, I need new words in my vocabulary that I try to invent every day. I don't really invent new visual rules for cinema, I work on the interactive language to see how it can be used to tell interactive stories.

> Until the Cologne trade show, I really had the feeling absolutely no one had a clue of what I was talking about.

And what are some of the mistakes that games continue to make, perhaps sticking too rigidly to a template that needs to be reexamined?

The current set of rules most game designers follow today were defined twenty years ago. Some of them are very simple: offer the player a challenge, give him a reward if he succeeds, if he fails make him do it again until he succeeds and gets a reward. Go the next level. Offer the player a challenge, give him a reward, etc.

Another interesting example is about ramping: with the first coin-ups, games became more and more difficult because the owner of the arcade machine wanted the player to put more and more coins in. So the rule was "start easy so the player gets addicted, become progressively more and more difficult so the player puts more and more coins because he does not want to lose his progress in the game".

These rules are still used today, although they don't make sense anymore. We have used these great rules as long and as much as possible, but I don't believe we can do much more with them now. We make the same games for twenty years, based on mechanics, patterns, challenges, game over sequences, and ramping. If we want to create new types of experiences, we will need to free ourselves from the old grammar and invent a new one, a more open-ended one, a more creative one, a more ambitious one.

When I watched a few scenes play out in Heavy Rain, I was intrigued by how you manage to generate tension and anticipation. The knowledge that I can die and the game goes on, that I'm not getting caught up in the typical death/game over scenario, seems to resonate in unexpected ways.

Your actions have consequences, that's the motto of the game. Instead of saying "you will lose something if one of your character dies," we prefer to say "you tell a different version of the story where you will see different things than if your character was alive." Death is not a penalty, it becomes a part of the story that you

Skateboarding is fun. Interactivity should be much more than that.

contributed to write. What I like about this is that it gives some weight to your acts in the game. It is like killing, which is something so common in games that you don't even mention it. In Heavy Rain, we hope to create situations where killing someone will become a very difficult moral decision to make, where it won't be about killing a bunch of pixels to move to the next, but where it will be about taking the difficult decision to take the life of a human being.

Giving weight to player's decisions–I think this is my ultimate goal with Heavy Rain.

Does it get a little frustrating trying to explain a game that, in your head, is so far removed from the norm that it really must be played? I'd imagine too you have to take this somewhat delicately and not create too many unrealistic or misguided expectations.

You cannot imagine how frustrating it can be. Until the Cologne trade show, I really had the feeling absolutely no one had a clue of what I was talking about. I faced a similar situation with Indigo, until the day the game was released and people could connect my speech to the game. I am sure the same thing will happen with Heavy Rain. Not creating unrealistic expectations about the game is also very important for me. I don't pretend to offer a procedural story where everything is possible or an open world where if you kill the father, the son will find you to get revenge. What Heavy Rain aims to be is a well written and visually stunning journey creating a strong sense of emotional involvement within discrete narrative boundaries (wow, that's a long and boring sentence…). In short, we aim to create a unique emotional journey, characters and situations that you will remember for a long time. This is my promise to players.

I'm not going to ask you: How long of a game is Heavy Rain? But I would like you to respond to my thoughts that games are often too long today, and are poorly paced and are increasingly creating stretches that feel like a chore.

I cannot agree more. There is this strange notion that "more is better." A 120-minute movie is definitely better than a 90 minute one. A book with 200 pages is better than a book with only 180. A 40-hour-long game is thus better than a 10-hour one. Games are expensive and a young audience wants more for their money. An older audience rather expects a better experience than a longer one. This trend also relates to a change in the way we enjoy entertainment. Apart from students, few adult gamers can spend 40 hours playing one game, finding the time and not getting bored at some point. Movies are usually 90 minutes, so are soundtracks, TV shows are 50 minutes long weekly. Games are about 10 hours long.

Given the quality most next gen titles are targeting, creating 10 hours is already a significant challenge. Beyond this limit, it becomes almost impossible to maintain pacing and narrative in a consistent way.

I personally prefer eight hours holding my breath than 40 hours going from level to level fighting enemies.

Working for an adult audience, I don't feel this is an issue. Heavy Rain will offer a high replayability value for people who will want to see everything, but that was definitely not my goal designing the game and I don't think it will be that important for Heavy Rain's players.

Why is it so hard for gamemakers to get away from physical threat as an immersion device? I have this fantasy that in Heavy Rain, I may go a good hour without being in imminent danger, just going on a journey of discovery, finding clues, exploring this communicative space.

The need for physical threat comes from the old days of video games where the situations and emotions we could depict were so basic that we needed to evoke very visual things and offer very obvious trade-offs.

With Heavy Rain, I was myself surprised to discover how it becomes possible to make interactive everyday's life moments and make them very interesting to play. We now reach a point where killing or dying is not the only situation that can be told through interactivity. In Heavy Rain, I like the scene where you take care of your son, where you have to deal with other characters, or make moral choices. Most of them do not involve your life but have consequences on the story or just on who you want your character to behave. It really opens new possibilities.

Would it be a wrong notion to expect a level designer or gameplay designer to have a more intimate understanding of the mechanics behind storytelling?

I spent ten years trying to teach game designers how to tell a story and I miserably failed. Now I am going to spend the next ten years to try to teach game design to storytellers with –I hope- more success… Game design is just a set of rules you have to play with. Being a writer is about being sensitive, observing the world around you and being able to translate it in a way that will trigger emotion for the audience. I believe one is easier to learn than the other.

As every game mostly emulates every game before it, are we artificially creating this idea in the collective gamer community of what is supposed to be compelling?

There is a common idea in our industry that a good game should be "fun." I think that this definition is very limited. I believe a good game should be sad, fascinating, funny, shocking, thought-provoking. Skateboarding is fun. Interactivity should be much more than that.

I like when a gamemaker calls himself an inventor. You are working within an ever-changing canvas. What lessons will you take away from Heavy Rain?

I call myself an author rather than an inventor. "Author" does not imply that I am talented, but just that I am sincere trying to share with others things that matter to me, believing that they may just spend a pleasant moment or maybe even keep something in them of this experience.

I don't know yet what I will take away from Heavy Rain. I had a real pleasure spending these years living and breathing with these characters, a strange mix of real human beings and their virtual clones. It is the first personal story I wrote for a video game, the first story that I feel really connected to. All I hope is that players will feel emotionally involved in this experience and have a unique moment playing Heavy Rain. Beyond Quantic Dream and Sony, I believe this game will be important for our industry whatever happens. If we succeed, we will open a new way for the future. If we fail, it will take a while before anyone else will try to create an emotional-narrative-driven experience for an adult audience. That would really be a shame, because I know there is something there…play

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The Story On Story

As games continue to evolve, we reflect on their narrative ambitions...

by

Dave Halverson
Brady Fiechter
Heather Campbell
Eric L. Patterson

art Robert Duenas

What's my story?

words Dave Halverson

My emotions, where games are concerned, and film for that matter, are heavily influenced by music.

Unless you're making a game where dialogue is a major component, telling the story shouldn't be your first priority, or your second, or even third. Be it books, movies, TV, or games a story is only as good as its author, its characters and performances, and its universe respective to the target audience. What sets games apart is that unlike books or movies they're judged on playability and technical prowess first, hence the term "game." Get either one wrong and no matter how good the story is, it won't gel.

A great video game story teller knows how to let the game en masse do the talking. Square made us cry watching a tiny thumbelina sprite bite the big one in Final Fantasy IV…that's powerful stuff.

My emotions, where games are concerned, and film for that matter, are heavily influenced by music. The better the score drives the narrative the more powerful the scene. When Maximus was crossing over, for instance, at the end of Gladiator, the combination of the music and his hand brushing over the wheat… I don't often cry over movies, but, major waterworks ensued. Ridley Scott laid the foundation early for that shot, and had to sell the entire film to make it work. From *Blade Runner* on, Ridley Scott is a master, as is Quentin Tarantino.

If these guys were making games I doubt they'd look for screen actors. I really don't care for celebrity voice overs, or even live dialogue, unless it's well cast. Worst case scenario: Activision's True Crime Streets of LA. An obvious marketing ploy, the cavalcade of A-listers were fish way out of water... Chris Walken in a game? No, not unless it's Ping Pong 2, the Final Paddle. Also, Movie Games based on the movie suck 99% of the time.

Video game VO is an art unto itself as is anime VO, which is why the best voice work comes from anime actors. Stars only shine in video games when the game is written for them, such as The Chronicles of Riddick, Afro Samurai, and Brutal Legend. Vin Diesel and Jack Black are fervent gamers and Sam L is big into manga and comics. All three poured themselves into their respective VG roles as they would a film, and the results are extraordinary…

Where'd the funny go BTW? RARE's Conker: Live and Reloaded, Radical's Crash Twinsanity, Nintendo's DKC (Cranky Kong) and Ubi Montreal's Rabbids Go Home are the only truly funny games that spring to mind, although I did laugh my arse off in Madworld.

Here's my story on game stories, and I'm sticking to it:

The Golden Rule: No matter how well written; a given story is only as good the music, art, characters, universe and fusion allow. I prefer real-time in engine dialogue with cinemas kept to a minimum. Shiny cinemas are cool for prologues, flashbacks, and between level snacks, but I'd rather avoid "levels" altogether too. The following games get everything right; although you need only partake in the first 30 minutes of Brutal Legend to witness the perfect storm of all of the above.

Best of the Best: Brutal Legend, Psychonauts, Afro Samurai, Ratchet and Clank Future, Prince of Persia, inFamous, Uncharted, Heavenly Sword, Primal, Batman: Arkham Asylum, Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee and Strangers Wrath, and MGS4 Guns of the Patriots.

"Realism" usually isn't: Unless you're Kojima Productions, Team Ninja, Sucker Punch, Insomniac, Naughty Dog, Rocksteady, Ubi Soft Montreal—close up facial animation is appalling. And please stop trying to model celebrities. It's creepy. Better to stylize your characters and spend the money on gameplay. Bill Murray's face and expression in the Ghostbusters game…scary.

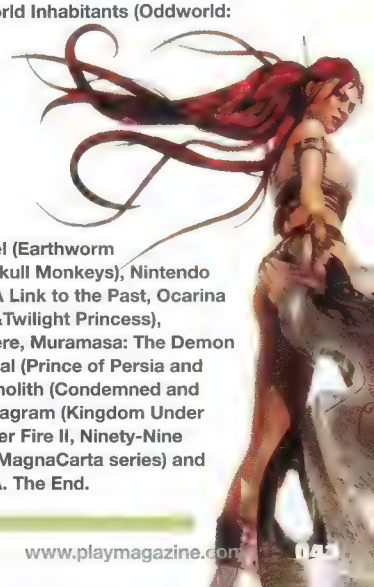
Less is more: Music and action often speak louder than words, hence, dialogue boxes and/or game speak often trump VO: See: Super Metroid, Castlevania Symphony of the Night, Rayman 2: The Great Escape, Muramasa, Okami, and ICO. Just as more is almost never better (with the exception of Metal Gear Sold 4 Guns of the Patriots). There's nothing worse than sitting through load after load to see a movie clip in a movie game.
Of Note: Climax created their own fluttering tones to reflect emotion and frame of mind in Shining in the Darkness before VO was possible and I find it effective to this day.

Plausibility is overrated: Unless I'm playing a hardcore simulation, in which case there should be no story, I prefer universes that make their own rules. Take almost any FPS or Survival Horror and put an actual person in that situation and they don't go towards the unholy flesh eaters or heavily armed assailants; they'd run, FAST, in the opposite direction, so, don't make me hide stuff in footlockers, and feel free to give me unlimited ammo. If I'm playing an RPG I fully expect to barge into people's houses and find chests in the desert, just as an energy drink, houseplant, or med kit will heal gaping zombie wounds.

Disconnects—Bad: Cinemas are fine, but don't transform exaggerated in-game characters into realistic people, or polish them so much that the game looks shite in comparison.
Improvise! It's MUCH better to break from the norm altogether and augment a story via alternative art form, as seen in Sucker Punch's multi-layered hand drawn dioramas for Sly Cooper and inFamous (also see Climax's Shadow Puppet intro For Sudeki).

Real time character interaction is also a dicey proposition. At its best it can have a profound effect; Prince of Persia being the ultimate example, but it can also sap momentum and continuity, as in Mass Effect where immediately following traumatic events addressing your teammates renders stock replies as if nothing ever happened.

Off the top my head, some of my all-time favorite Storytellers: Tim Schafer/Double Fine (Psychonauts, Brutal Legend), Oddworld Inhabitants (Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee and Sranger's Wrath), Grasshopper Manufacture (No More Heroes, Killer 7), SURGE's David Robinson (Afro Samurai), Hideki Kamiya (Bayonetta, Okami), Doug TenNapel (Earthworm Jim, The Neverhood, Skull Monkeys), Nintendo (The Legend of Zelda A Link to the Past, Ocarina of Time, Wind Waker, &Twilight Princess), Vanillaware (Odin Sphere, Muramasa: The Demon Blade), UbiSoft Montreal (Prince of Persia and Assassin's Creed), Monolith (Condemned and FEAR), Blueside/Phantagram (Kingdom Under Fire and Kingdom Under Fire II, Ninety-Nine Nights), Softmax, (the MagnaCarta series) and a few way homers TBA. The End.



Be gone story, be gone! (Or maybe not)

words Brady Fiechter

When I was a wee lad, innocent and dumb, I didn't have to argue with myself or with my friends about why we liked to climb rocks and run through corn fields and pick ourselves up from a nasty tree-house fall and do it all again. There was a risk and reward in our adventures, an excitement to discover and overcome the world's curious obstacles. External pressures pushed us forward, and internal pressures pushed us to observe and learn, just like every other kid. Sometimes there would be some major change or insight—a serious as figuring out you don't throw rocks at bee hives or you don't always get away with a major bike crash without injury!

Life is always a metaphor for story, but when you're a kid, it's often as pure as the wind-carved snow drifts we used to run through. Now that I'm no longer a wee lad, I've lost my innocence and in some ways am probably just as dumb. The dumb part comes from thinking way too hard about way too many things, like trying to figure out just what the hell is going on with storytelling in video games these days.

I think of games as many things. Vessels for a good story is one of them (hah! hear me out), but my definition of story begins with the adventure and wonder that infused the narrative of my youth. As an adult, I get to climb the ruins of a crumbling temple, swing a sword in cave and defeat evil, perch on a rock and snipe zombies on my way back inside a creepy mansion. Every journey holds a story, and this is where games are at their most emotional best. As an adult, I still get to play.

Gamemakers today are becoming increasingly interested in relying less on the unspoken wonders of world design and more on the language of traditional storytelling—establishing a plot, creating dialogue, defining a beginning, middle and end of character building. Since we like numbers as gamers, let me make one up: 90 percent of the time, traditional storytelling in a game makes it less fun, less interesting, less effective as a game. And less effective as an emotional tone space that lets us create our own stories in our imaginations.

Every game benefits by context. Even Tetris means more if I have an idea of why those blocks demand to be placed into their right position. Metroid is awesome because I know just enough to get my imagination going: Samus is on an alien planet, it's mysterious, and I need to find the mother alien. If I'm about to get into a destruction derby and spend a few hours of my day crashing cars, I'm more invested if, say, I'm tasked with taking down the lead car because he's *evil*. But once characters start opening their mouths and telling me about love and death and the human way, the gameplay spell is snapped or, at the very least, fractured. This happens almost every time.

The big question, for me, is exactly what it is about storytelling that's harming the fun of games today: simply

Metroid is awesome because I know just enough to get my imagination going.

piss-poor storytelling at its core, or a complete lack of understanding when it comes to how the language of a film or novel naturally fits into our games? It's certainly a bit of both, and railing on how "game stories suck" is not a constructive solution to guiding change.

Textbooks and design docs must address this topic before screaming as a critic can gain any traction, as the craft of making a game tightens and evolves. It would be beneficial to take one slice of the problem, dissect it and see where it leads us.

I've brought up dozens of things that bug me in the past months, but for whatever reason, I've really noticed lately how distracted I am by transitions from cut scenes to the gameplay. It's not the quality of the dialogue so much as what happens when that conversation or moment of action moves into gameplay—too often I've lost my belief in the gameplay, I've lost my belief in the characters, I've lost the spell the game is attempting to cast.

Here's a very simple but recurring example I'll take from Uncharted 2. You come up to a boss battle, you wail on the guy, you shoot him over and over, the game goes to a cut scene—and your partner takes one shot and boss is dead. Or you're in a massive shootout, a game cuts to your squad raging in and taking everyone out, demonstrating powers and actions that you never could have achieved through actual gameplay. Story beats and gameplay beats trip over each other.

Creating convincing characters and situations through storytelling is another problem, when the gameplay focuses on shooting what will ultimately clock in at hundreds if not thousands of bad guys. We can be one-man armies and still enjoy a good yarn. Half-Life 2 and Fallout 3 nail it, but they nail it because they imprint their stories onto the world more than the character you are controlling.

My personal preference is a game that communicates most directly through its visuals and the storied puzzle pieces that eventually fit the canvas of the world. The simple iPhone game Spider: The Secret of Bryce Manor affected me more than most games this year through its imagery. As the spider skitters past a discarded ring in the sink pipes—was this a discarded lover's ring from a night of anger?—the world reveals its story. As it spins past a lone shot glass on the table, perhaps the leftovers of a depressive night of loneliness, or a birthday party celebrating new life, layers of depth and complexity reveal themselves.

We're getting to a point where that spider is often expected to open its mouth and talk, which will often be along the vapid lines of "I have a bad feeling about this." There goes the fun of the fantasy, there goes the simplicity I enjoyed running around as a child, just exploring an emerging world. I have a bad feeling we are a ways off from making sense of the storytelling dilemma in games, but we'll get there.

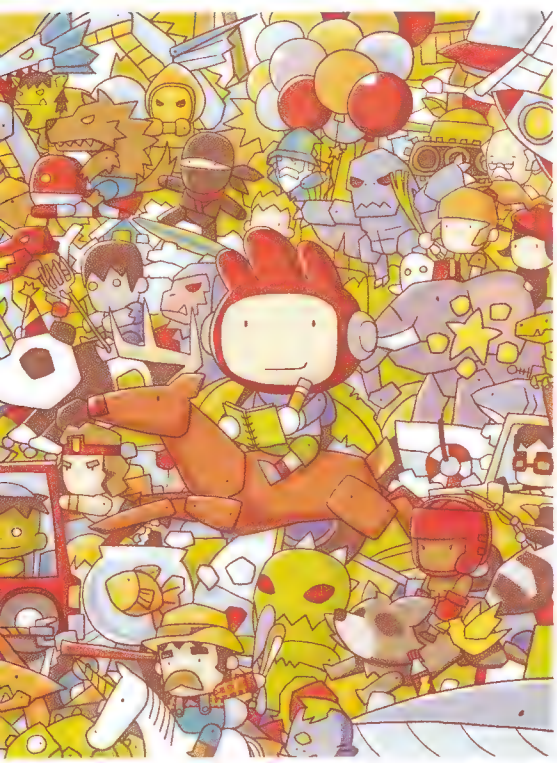
words Heather Campbell

Writing Your Way Through a World

The stories written for video-games are terrible. Often classless, typically boorish and predictable, the plots of games are rarely better than fan-fiction, and are often far, far uglier. At best, they are Sci-Fi teleplays, but at their worst, they're the end-product of corporate teams hungry to fill a checklist of locations. Nothing as good as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or even *Of Mice and Men* has come out of the world of video-games, and considering the volume of text featured in RPGs over the last thirty years, this is a miserable indictment. When we say that game stories are great, we really mean that we were entertained by them, and usually it's because we've turned off the most mature parts of ourselves.

Still, despite the unlikely arrival of gaming's Steinbeck any time soon, there are interesting stories to be found within many of our most recent games. The other day, I was playing a game with an incredible story. A young boy was faced with a challenge: He was steps away from an ancient power, but his trusty sword had failed him. A natural canyon divided him from fate, so gathering his courage, this young boy crafted a stairwell from a huge pile of old school books, summoned Mozart, and used the old composer as a bridge between himself and his goal. Nervous over the great height of the chasm beneath him, he bred a family of chickens and threw them into the hole, in case he lost his footing. Finally, the boy grasped the mystical power in his hands, and the world was saved from an unknowable end.

Until shortly thereafter, when an atomic holocaust was visited upon him, and he died in the arms of his long-lost mother, as six Einsteins looked on.



With such a strange array of set-pieces, we can guess at the DS game featured above. We're talking about Scribblenauts, and the story was written using a language of game-actions and personal player choices. Scribblenauts is unique because of the variety of objects the player can conjure, but it cleanly illustrates the power of the player/author. Story is not just the tacked-on narrative that designers and developers write *on top* of the game; it is also the tale told by the player with every move they make from the title screen on.

A gamer doesn't have to have access to a dictionary's worth of objects to write a game story. The story of a game is also made up of the player's game behaviors. I've written before that the story of Super Mario Bros. can depend on the skill of the gamer. A novice might play Super Mario, dash into the first Goomba several times, and the game would about a miserable plumber desperate for death. Truth is, this is a far more interesting story than the one that Nintendo provides, despite the surrealism of Mario's included narrative. A giant turtle who kidnaps a princess is an interesting piece of fiction, but doesn't have the grim nihilism of our Suicidal Mario Bros.

See, every button we press in a game is a word, every choice we make is a sentence. A game is a story that we are crafting, typed out in rapid paragraphs on our controllers. The ones with the most interesting fictions are the games with enough variety to support emergent game-play; the story of a game of Rock Band, for example, is too narrow to be unique -- nearly every player will play the line of notes in a similar fashion. By contrast, the story of a game of Fallout 3 is dependent on the player, with each game telling vastly different tales

A game is a story that we are crafting, typed out in rapid paragraphs on our controllers.

of personality and will. The cut-scenes and breaks in Fallout 3 are always going to be less interesting than the personal journeys of each player.

Cut scenes will only carry us as far as movies, and while there are many moving and diverse stories told in film, gaming will never eclipse cinema simply by aping its techniques. Similarly, it's unlikely that the physical text of a game will ever give gamers a piece of fiction comparable to a good novel. Instead, the most powerful games of the future will be the ones that harness the uniqueness of each player's narrative.

Already, we're seeing the hints of this idea in games like Demon's Souls, which not only allow a large amount of freedom to the player, but give each adventurer a chance to see the actions being written by their fellow gamers. Additionally, by giving players control over the hint system of the game, each combatant is directly affecting the world for the adventurers that follow. The story I played during Demon's Souls was probably far more straightforward than any of the games you will get to engage, simply because there were far fewer pieces of misdirection and deception posted on the floors of the game. What's more, a gamer five years from now would play a much lonelier, more difficult game of Demon's Souls, as fewer fellow players means fewer hints, and more infrequent windows into one another's failures. Still, the story that this future-player writes will be potent, because of the number of actions available to the player in the game itself.

When we unshackle ourselves from the restraints of existing types of fiction -- when we embrace the uniqueness of games -- only then will gaming come into its own, and become a true powerhouse of narrative. Until then, we will continue to write the best stories in gaming, with every choice we make with the controller in our hands.

Making the cut...

words Eric L. Patterson

I have no idea what my fellow Play staffers are talking about in their own versions of this feature story; from the talk that has been going around, however, I wouldn't be surprised to find many of them listing all of the reasons that cutscenes are the devil incarnate. Well, truthfully, I'm not quite in agreement with them. I *like* cutscenes! I mean, sure, they can be over-used, or used improperly, but the idea that the game has to tell its entire story within the confines of its playable world seems limiting and unrealistic. Some games can't do that, and others shouldn't. Many of you I'm sure will want to lynch me for this, but the praise given to games like Metroid Prime for their "refreshing" methods of telling back story via in-game computer displays or research notes instead of spoken dialog or cinematic flashbacks gets a yawn from me. Sometimes, a game can do that and pull it off great, but damn if I didn't wish this fetish for keeping Samus (one of gaming's potentially strongest female characters) a faceless mute would be over with already.

Writing a love letter to cutscenes doesn't exactly sound like the most enthralling of things to convince myself to write, however.

It was sitting in Brady's office about a week before typing this that the wheels in my brain started turning on what I would like to delve into. Our illustrious EIC was telling me about how Heavy Rain was going to be this amazing adventure in storytelling, putting into the hands of players choices with real consequences that, instead of leading to a game over screen, would lead said player down a different path. The question was, given such power over their digital personification, would they enjoy the uncertainty that could potentially arise?

Game designers, hear my plea: realize when you suck at crafting characters....

The conversation then turned to the question of, well, questions. "Choice" is really an illusion in games at this point, as everything that can arise from deciding which choice to make must already be accounted for and programmed in for the most part. (Until the day when, I told Brady, A.I. would be good enough to "play back" against us; a day I think will be the truth breakthrough for the medium.) Presenting a player that illusion is going to become, more and more, a necessary element of gaming. Video games aren't movies; being dragged through a storyline where we're told to control one or more characters but have no real control over who they are and what they do is something that will be harder to pull off the more complicated games become. The problem is, getting this wrong is stupidly easy, to a degree that you can make the entire inclusion of choice seem insulting to the person playing your game.

This is an error that I've seen crop up nowhere near as often as it has in Japanese RPGs. I won't name names here, but I remember one particular title a while back that featured a main hero who was totally wishy-washy, teamed up with a couple leading ladies who were appalling in their walking all over him. I was, at one point, given the choice to go along with their stupid plan, or stay out of it. I chose to not participate, and my reward for doing so was a loop of text boxes that wouldn't let me continue on until I had picked the answer that the developer wanted me to. *Why give me a choice if events will turn out the same either way, or worse, if you won't even let me pick the answer that I want to pick?* This isn't even an illusion of choice; it's a sham, and a punch in the face of the player.

Mass Effect is a natural example of a game that excels in giving the player choice. Sure, there are a set amount of paths to be taken, with a structured list of possible outcomes already established, but the way in which the choices given to the player play out make for a far more compelling game in terms of storytelling. I am progressing through the unfolding of an epic saga told by somebody else, and yet at the same time I feel like it is by my own hand how the path traversing that journey is walked.

That contrast–pre-created storylines with player-decided elements–leads into what, for me, has become the true desire from games in regards to storytelling: the idea that a rich and detailed tale can be told not with the writer's hero, but my hero. Some games need a strong, pre-defined main character; Uncharted was the magnificent game it was in no small part to the awesomeness of Mr. Nathan Drake. For a lot of games, however, main characters are under-developed and poorly designed, giving me the beloved "bald space marines", insultingly-dressed females who offer little more than carefully-rendered cleavage, and generic "everyman" men who no doubt all shop from the same mail-order catalog.

Game designers, hear my plea: realize when you suck at crafting characters, and let me do it instead. Mass Effect's engrossing nature wasn't just because I had a hand in how I made my way through it; it was also due to the fact that I was doing so with a main character I cared about because I had created her myself. Far too many times I've experienced games that were brilliant to play but where I couldn't stand the main cast to a point that it hurt my ability to be sucked into what I saw on screen. Every Mario game, for example. Yeah, I said it.

The popular thought is that good storytelling requires a collection of pre-defined heroes and heroines, but the reality is that's total BS a lot of the time. Final Fantasy VII would have been just as good of a game if I could have made Cloud a middle-aged man from India with a mullet instead of an emolicious white kid with teased blonde hair. Video games are not movies, and as such do not need to be treated the same. Use the power that you hold in your hands to its full potential. Realize that, sometimes, no matter how cool you think that buff dude with his high-tech combat suit is, other out there simply won't be able to relate to them and may pass up your game because of that fact. If your storyline is not one that directly requires a character of a certain gender, race, or physical style in order to be told, then let me decide those things–and give me more reason to care about what they experience in the world that you've created in the process. play

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Borderlands

Run to the Border

words Dave Halverson

Am I suggesting that Borderlands is a better game than Fallout 3 or Half-Life?

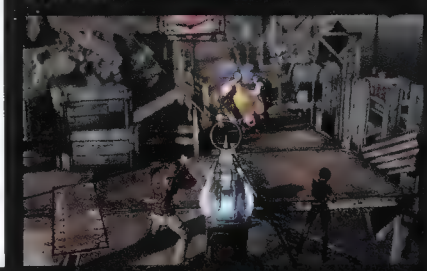
What would you say to a game that combines the expanse and role playing features found in games like Fallout with the first-person shooting and adventure of a Half-Life? Gotcha, so we're on the same page… What if I told you I'd be selling it short to stop there? Hey now, no need to get personal. Am I suggesting that Borderlands is a better game than Fallout 3 or Half-Life? That would be a big 10-4, but before you begin hurling expletives into the non-living organism your holding (pretty cool huh? Look ma, no wires!) allow me to elaborate.

As much as I love a good wasteland, character building, shooting at things and a solid yarn—there's a limit to how far I'm willing to go to get it. Expanse is one thing but I can only take so much menial tasking and trite discovery between killing the resident evil, especially when it's inelegant. As much as I admire Fallout 3 for its sheer mass, it's as lost on me as Half-Life for its utter PC-ness. Toting around boxes and driving telekinetically would be okay if I were a mystic but Half-Life's brilliant underbelly was marred for me by its stringent PC first-person formula. Where those games fail, Borderlands succeeds, and where they excel, Borderlands does it better in my opinion.

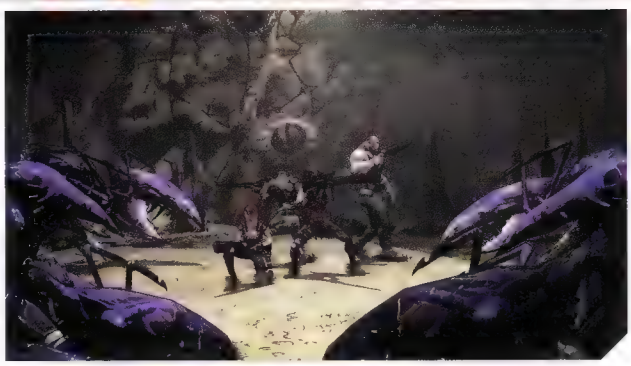
The backstory is as straightforward or as deep as you want it to be, depending on how much you're willing to dig, but the goal is simple. Choose your poison from four unique treasure hunters lured to the dusty, desolate planet Pandora to find the legendary alien vault and, well, find it. Like the best adventure films, it's not the prize itself that makes the story but the journey, finding and obtaining it. Once you take out a few of the local bandits and make your way into Fyrestone, with a little help from the Mad-Maxian R2D2, Claptrap, you're mere minutes away from a succession of progressively more action-packed missions among the kinds of locales we ordinary humans dream about, and characters you'll care to know. Your main contact in Fyrestone is Dr. Zed who provides the healing otherwise weapons, ammo, items and armor come out of vending machines with a decidedly Bioshock vibe. You won't find yourself talking to an unending chain of throwaway bit players in Fyrestone that you'd sooner snuff than partake in their menial fetch quests, but rather a colorful, yet sparse, array of oppressors like Nine-Toes (so fun to kill) and folks brave or crazy enough to call Pandora home. …Old coots like T.K. Baha, who just wants his nasty old prosthetic leg back; or Scooter, the local Catch-A-Ride station attendant/Runner mechanic. …You want a Runner by the way, you *need* a Runner. Not only are they a gas to drive with their Halo-style controls, but you can switch between the driver's and gunner's seat Riddick-style to ogle your character, and they make man meat out of bandits even at low speeds. Which brings me to one of Borderlands biggest draws the design. Similar

Masterful Multiplayer

If you so desire, four player co-op online and two-player split screen multiplayer is built right in. Players can jump in and out anytime, anywhere.



to SURGE s Afro Samurai, one of the most gorgeous game worlds ever created, Gearbox apply a similar living graphic-novel/manga veneer to a scorched, craggy open world of makeshift townships, fashioned from junkyard scraps, contrasted by '60s-era lighted signs and sci-fi-meets-steam-punk vehicles. It s the character design that really gets you though. Borderlands annihilates nearly all comers in the first-person canon. From the protagonists (especially Hunter and Lilith) to the bandits, to the local wildlife, it s as original an arid world as Bioshock was an undersea one. The gameplay, while ultra traditional in execution run, jump, crouch, strafe, lob and fire—is taken to new heights by way of each character s intrinsic Action Skills and the most extensive, yet easy to mange, arms cache/leveling system in the known galaxy. Similar to SOE ARPGs such as Untold Legend and Baldur s Gate, the framework is simple: Killing enemies and completing missions reaps XP for leveling up; accumulated points are applied to a skill tree to upgrade your abilities; and guns, ammo, and cash left behind by fallen foe or hidden in crates, chests or Skag vomit (Pandora s distinctly Alien looking version of wolves) can be picked up and either swapped out or stowed in your backpack to trade in for cash. It s the Skills and weapon upgrades that make the difference. Depending on your character, every SMG, revolver, rifle, shotgun, and incendiary weapon has a unique signature. Beyond the usual damage, accuracy, and fire rate, you can purchase upgrades for elemental, electrocution, and fire effects; recoil reduction; reload speed; critical hit percentage and on and on same for grenades. You can even buy back any sold items for the same price you sold them. The AI, mission structure, balance, pacing, and level design in Borderlands emphasizes linear quality immersion with open-world expanse. Each main mission feels like a taut adventure game level and in between you can refer to the job postings at Fyrestone depot and take on as many menial tasks as you deem necessary to bolster your inventory and toughen up your character. Dying is inevitable in Borderlands, but cloning isn t free, so it s best to take your time and stay awhile. When a game looks and plays as good as this, lingering is easy it s the leaving that s hard. Besides, the badder you are, the richer you ll be. So get yourself over to the nearest New U Station, register your DNA profile and get to work. play



Beware of Dog: Skags are far from man's best friend on Pandora.

System: PC, Consoles **Developer:** Orange_Juice **Publisher:** Rockin' Android **Available:** PC now, Consoles Fall 2009

Rockin' Android Visits Play Magazine

Not the Google Phone, you idiot. The other Rockin' Android!

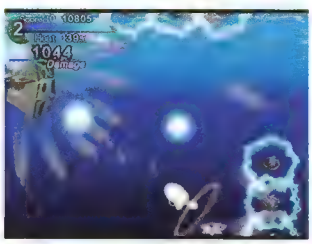
words Heather Anne Campbell

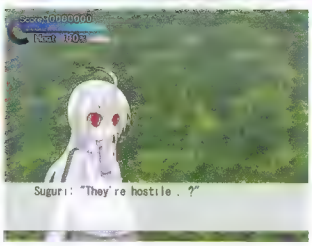
If you've been to Japan, and you're reading this magazine, chances are you're familiar with the *doujin* scene. Doujin basically means clique, but in manga/game terms, refers to an independent publication of either a game, a manga, or an anime.

Twice a year, a convention called Comiket is held in Japan, a twenty-acre conference dedicated to the doujin community. Now, while most doujin are based on existing properties (think the naughty Final Fantasy comics you've seen online), a significant portion are dedicated to original works. At Comiket, con attendees sweep over these indie games and comics, and some generate huge followings. Famously, CLAMP started as a doujin team, and their rabid fanbase can perhaps be explained by their cult origins.

Despite the popularity of doujin titles, there have been few legal ways to appreciate the Japanese indie gaming scene in America. That's

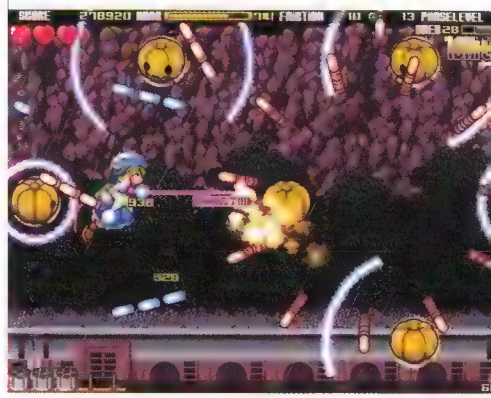
Suguri Perfect Edition

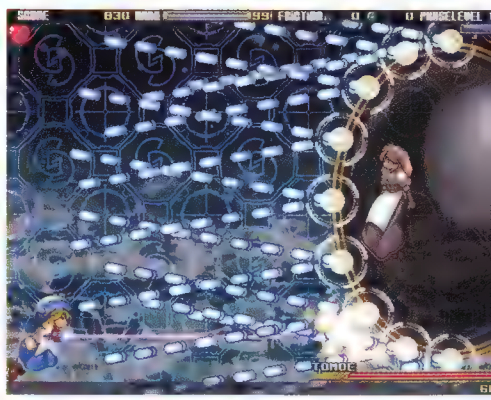




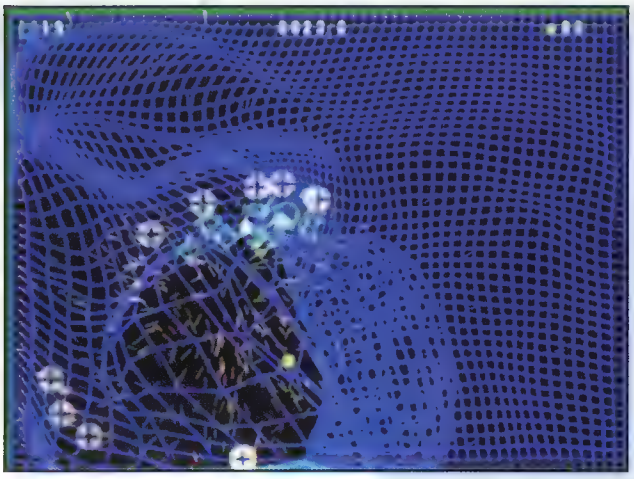
Unleash bullet hell on your friends and neighbors with Acceleration of Suguri.

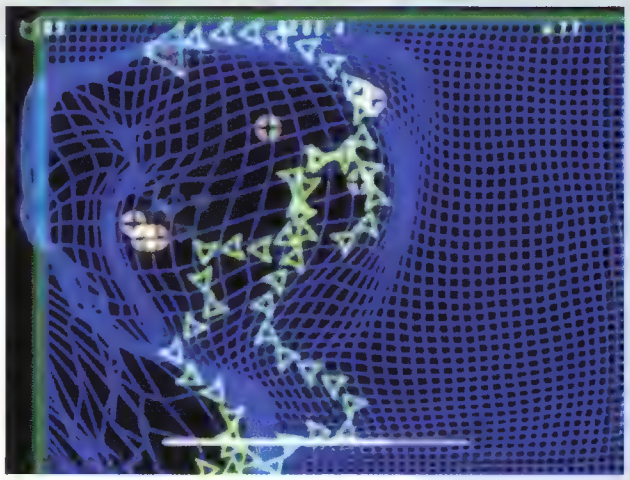
Gundemonium

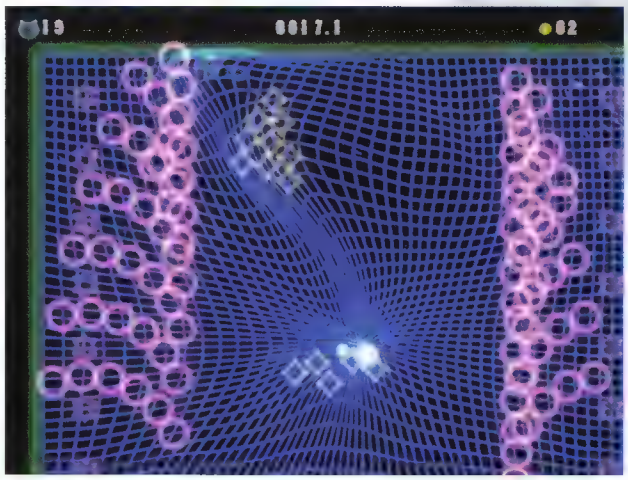




QLIONE







where Rockin' Android steps in. Their goal: To bring the best of the doujin world to computers and consoles. They've started with Suguri Perfect Edition, now available on Windows. A side-scrolling shooter from developer Orange Juice (great, great name), Suguri was a modest hit in the East, and generated a sequel: Acceleration of Suguri.

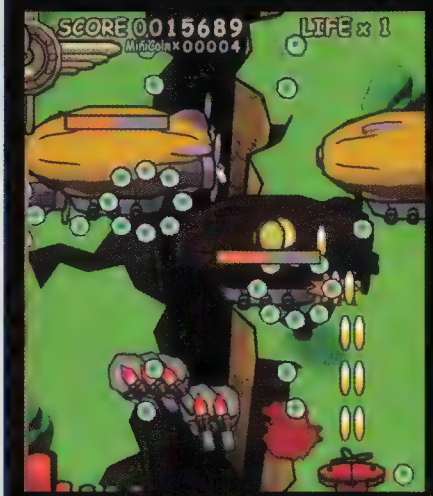
Acceleration of Suguri is the first to hit consoles, and it's a unique little title. With such a small budget, the game relies not on extraordinary graphics, but on gameplay—and that's what makes it shine. Acceleration is a two-person versus shooter, which takes place inside a sphere. Players choose their character, each with their own style of combat, and then battle it out with a combination of basic and special moves. Think of it this way: You and your buddy are playing Ikaruga, except all the action takes place on one screen, and you're firing bullets at one another. You have the mobility of a ship, but appear on screen as a tiny girl.

The action is chaotic and frenzied, and relies on rapid reflexes and pattern recognition. It's a bullet hell that you control, directed at your (unfortunately offline-only) opponent.

Other Rockin' Android titles that may or may not make it to consoles include Gundemonium ReCollection (side-scrolling and top-down shooters), Flying Red Barrel (a bullet-hell game drawn with large, heavy cartoon outlines), and QLIONE (a Geometry Wars meets Every Extend Extra enclosed puzzle shooter).

All of the titles have an old-school feel to them, and it's no mistake that this is what made them attractive to Enrique Galvez, President of Rockin' Android. While demoing the games, he smiled proudly at their retro charm. The Saturn is my favorite system,» he said. And it shows. play

Think of it this way: You and your buddy are playing Ikaruga, except all the action takes place on one screen, and you're firing bullets at one another.



Flying Red Barrel

System: Wii **Developer:** Ubisoft Montpellier **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Available:** October 27

Rabbids Go Home

From the Earth to the Moon, Maybe

words Dave Halverson

Before Michel Ancel became king of the jungle with Peter Jackson's *King Kong*, which raised the bar for movie-themed games considerably, he was the gaming world's foremost architect of all things...weird. His directorial debut, Rayman, released for the Atari Jaguar in 1995 (followed by PlayStation and Saturn versions in '96) made him a household name among hardcore gamers nearly overnight. The most lush and beautiful platformer created to date, Ancel's limbless blonde coifed anti-hero was the right game at the right time, introducing entirely new elements to the tried and true 2D formula. After conceiving the ambitious, innovative and altogether misunderstood Tonic Trouble, and doing for 3D what he did for 2D with his Rayman follow up, The Great Escape, Ancel moved into more traditional territory with Beyond Good and Evil—arguably the most underrated game of all time—which caught the eye of Peter Jackson, leading to the unlikely (but extremely profitable) pairing of one of gaming's most avant-garde designers with one of the world's most talented film directors, and the rest, as they say, is History.

With the world at his feet, what does a freshly minted über creator do for an encore? More movie games, perhaps? Rayman 4? Or spend the next five years dicking around with a bunch of ill-behaved impish rabbits? ...Old habits die hard. Somewhere down the line the mischievous Rabbids he designed during the making of King Kong (to go up against the limbless one in Rayman 4) burrowed so deep into his cerebellum they usurped their pending foe and convinced the creator of all things epic to spend the next few years creating Wii waggling party games—some good, some not so...

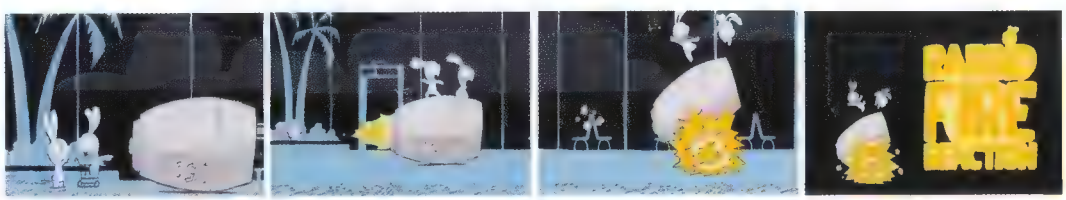
As much as I admire a man who follows his heart, I miss Rayman A LOT and I get the warm fuzzy just thinking about Beyond Good and Evil 2. It's time for Mr. Ancel's Rabbids to finally go home, and as the title of their solo non-party game debut suggests, that's exactly what they're doing. Apparently the Rabbids hail from the Moon, or at least they think they do, because that's where they're headed. All they have to do is build a mound of stuff 238,857 miles high and they're home free. So grab a shopping cart, follow the brass band on a mattress down the sewer pipe and get to it.

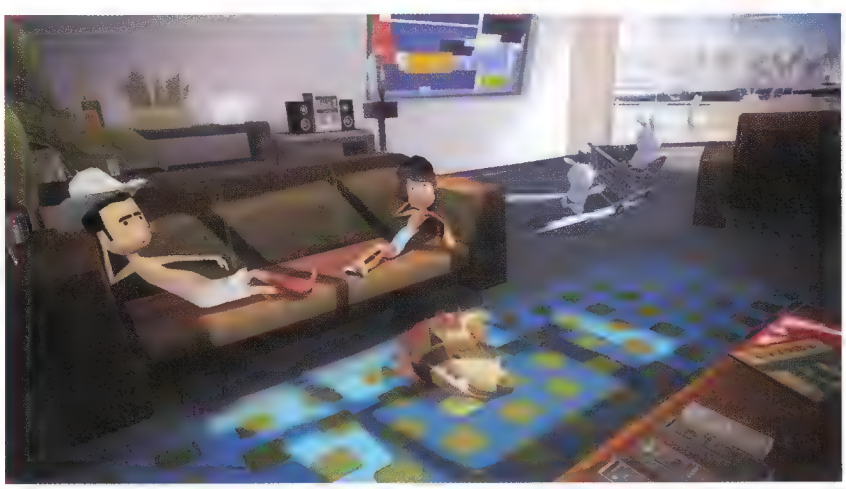
Rabbids Go Home is played with a Rabbid right inside the Wii Remote. Go ahead, shake it; and check out the detail while you're at it. An obvious lampoon (more like harpoon) of America's consumer culture (and do we ever have it coming), the gameplay consists of maneuvering your Rabbid-powered shopping cart through mission after mission of stuff collection; collecting XS stuff by rolling over it, and XL stuff by ramming or attacking it. The Rabbid in your cart (doing the collecting) attacks by scaring the fecal matter out of man and beast with a mighty "Bwaaaah!" or "Daaaah!" Scaring humans strips them of their clothes (every little

Are we there yet?

...grab a shopping cart, follow the brass band on a mattress down the sewer pipe and get to it.

bit counts) and converts your average guard dog to a pile of meaty snacks. Elsewhere your passenger in crime can also fire water jugs and other such make-shift projectiles to break through barriers, or you can fire the Rabbid out of your Wii Remote. At the end of each area, XS stuff is unloaded into the tuba of the nearest Stuff Collector and at the end each mission XL stuff is crammed down a toilet, where the mattress brigade awaits to whisk it back to the pile. In between each mass destruction zone lies Center City, a hub of sorts, full of stuff, people, obstacles, mad dogs, etc., leading to each new area, or if you dare, head for the menu and customize your Rabbids with paint, tattoos, art, and accessories. Confused? Don't be. Just imagine a 3D action game that controls like Mario Kart and you're halfway home. RGH is neither racing, although there are races and timed segments; action, although it is non-stop; or driving. It's a combination of all three really

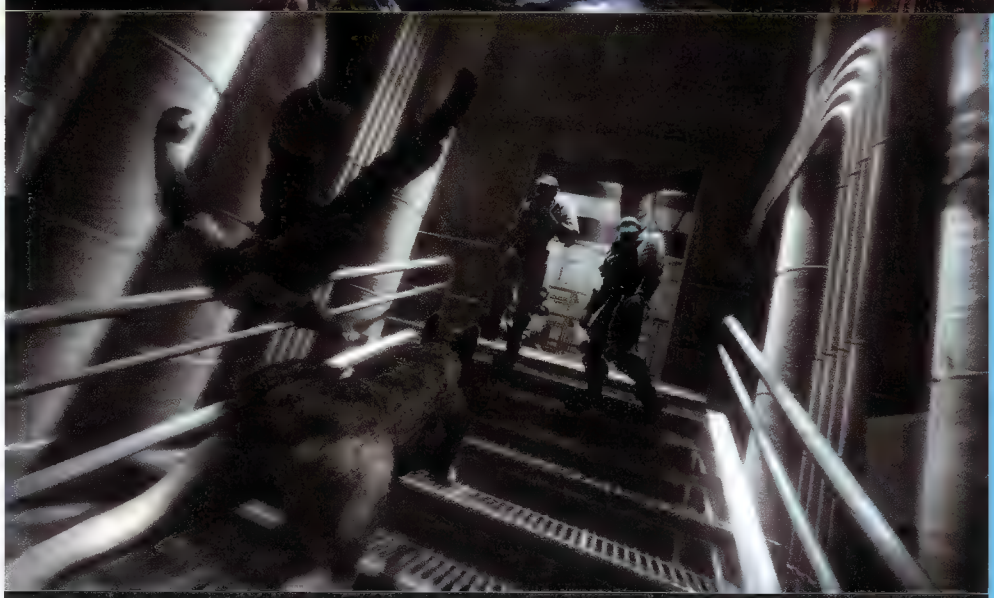




rife with physics and finesse-based gameplay in scenarios guaranteed to bring a smile to your face and perhaps moistness to your crotch. Unique? Oh yeah. Fun? You have no idea.

Back in 2006, Michel Ancel (along with Shigeru Miyamoto and Frédérick Raynal) was knighted by the French Minister of Culture and Communication, marking the first time video game developers were bequeathed such a hifalutin designation. Now I know why. You don't become a knight by creating limbless do-gooders, ballsy photo journalists, or building a better T-Rex or giant ape. Show me a 3-foot-tall, turd-shaped bipedal rabbit in red panties terrorizing a metropolis by way of similarly freakish cohorts and a shopping cart and I'll show you a man that deserves the word "Sir" before his name. play

System: PS3, Xbox 360 **Developer:** Volatile **Publisher:** Namco Bandai **ESRB:** M **Available:** Q1 2010



Dead to Rights Retribution

Namco's raw action remake is balls-to-the-wall fun.

words Douglass C. Perry

...English developer Volatile has cooked up a raucous hybrid shooter/beat-'em-up...

During a recent visit to Namco Bandai, I sat down to get some hands-on time with the fourth game in its original shooter series, Dead to Rights: Retribution. I wasn t expecting much--times have changed since the original came out (2002 on Xbox and PS2), and I took a wait-and-see approach to observe what Namco had under the hood.

Starring original character Jack Slate and his killer canine companion Shadow (a police academy reject who is half wolf, half malamute), English developer Volatile has cooked up a raucous hybrid shooter/beat- em-up that delivers instant bare-knuckle action. Namco has also re-imagined the game, setting Retribution up as a prequel, and delving into the narrative forces behind Jack and Shadow s friendship.

Since the release of the original titles, the whole games industry has moved on in so many ways, said Imre Jele, project director, Volatile Games. We re also facing a whole new generation of gamers with significantly different expectations about gameplay and story. We felt that re-imagining the franchise now would give us a stronger way tell Jack and Shadow s origin story and also introduce a new gameplay system.

My initial cynicism about the game was sound: The single-player action game has neither a co-op function nor a multiplayer mode. In fact, it s only got *one* mode: Story. You ll start the game playing as Jack, and within a few levels, Shadow becomes a playable character in certain levels. The massive looking dog, shown from the third-person perspective, is equipped Shadow Vision (a visual way of showing the canine s sniffer) and a range of devastating attacks.

In the final game, you'll predominantly play as Jack, while a handful of sections put you exclusively in control of Shadow. I played both the E3 demo and the newly revealed sixth level. The gritty urban atmosphere was filled with Joker-like, face-painted thugs who take a serious beating before going down. And Jack narrates the whole thing, giving Retribution a classic film noir vibe.

To my surprise, Retribution packed a seamless combat system that instantly switches from hand-to-hand combat to gunplay and back. It really caught my attention. We wanted to focus our efforts to perfect that system as the core gameplay, explained Jele. With such a diverse arsenal of combat tools at your disposal and various ways you can maneuver through a level, how you experience and play through the game will change each time.

With the robust melee mechanics, you can disarm enemies (and vice versa), uppercut them into unconsciousness, and throw them into electric fences (where they sizzle to death), all in one fell swoop. The deep combo tree contains dozens of quick face-button combo moves, which players will explore as the moves are unlocked throughout the game. And the shotgun, which quickly turned into my weapon of choice, packed a visceral, impact-punch that sent enemies flying face-first into the dank streets. All of that was before I sent Shadow to tear enemies limb from limb and rip them new ones with the snapping special attack, the tesickill.

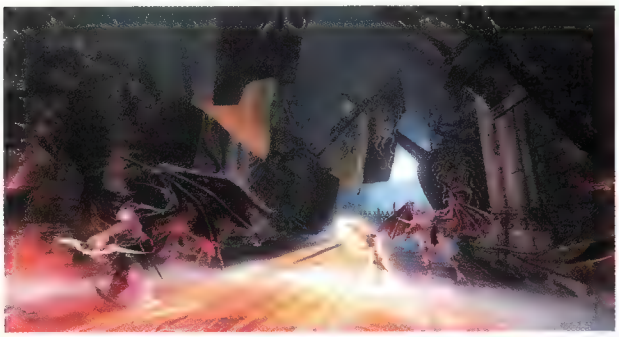
System: Xbox 360, PS3 **Developer:** Mercurysteam/Kojima Productions
Publisher: Konami **Available:** 2010

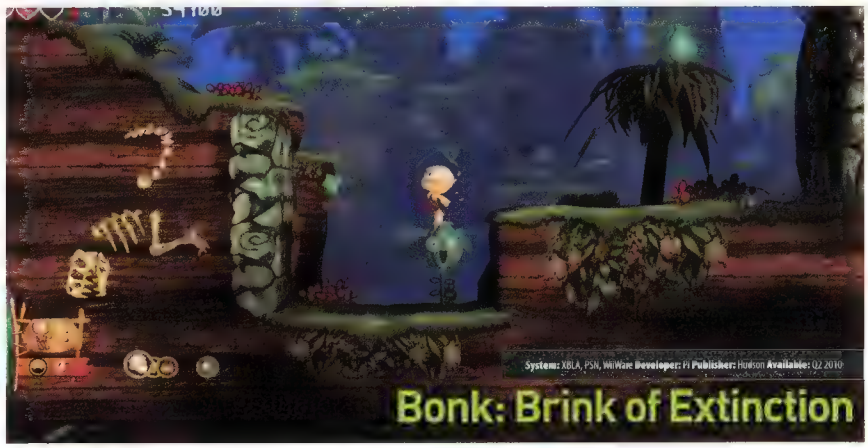
Castlevania: Lords of Shadow

For the record, as far as I know, I m the lone VG editor in these United States who s been calling for Bonk s return and a true next-generation 2D Sonic. Well, heeere s Bonk, and Project Needlemouse (the new 2D Sonic) is looking AMAZING, so if indeed Iga is working on a true next-gen 2D Castlevania which would explain why Kojima is Mercury Steaming on Lords of Shadows and considering that we also called the 2D resurgence that s currently in full bloom, either people are listening or there s some heavy duty coincidence going on. So let s test the waters shall we? Based on Pi s track record as one of the foremost up and coming indie dev houses and certain tell-tale signs embedded in yonder screens my gut tells me Bonk is going to bloom once again. If the XBLA, PSN, WiiWare DLG take off, which it will, rest assured Hudson s next move will be a full-blown head-swelling console rebirth. Next stop, Air Zonk!

Meanwhile new screens of Castlevania s upcoming new beginning Lords of Shadow reveal a corridor, but no candles! What are we supposed to whip for our little hearts?

And what s this about the protagonist vowing to wipe out the Belmonts? All I know is that it looks AMAZING and with Kojima Productions on the case, you know it s going to be stunning Color us eager! **Dave Halverson**





System: XBLA, PSN, WiiWare **Developer:** Pi **Publisher:** Hudson **Available:** Q2 2010

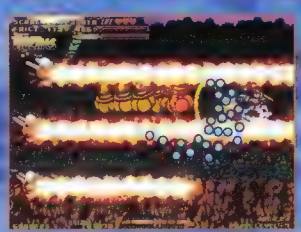
Bonk: Brink of Extinction

GUNDEMONIUM COLLECTION

From Developer *Platine Dispositif* - One of the Most Revered & Sought-After "Bullet-Hell Shooter" Titles from Japan.

WINDOWS PC GAME • Available November 24th 2009

GUNDEMONIUM Recollection



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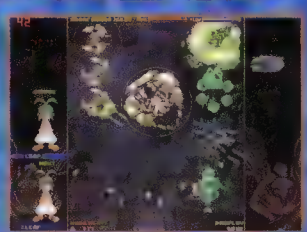

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Dave Halverson
PUBLISHER

Play games in the genres I know and love to their conclusion and then rate them on how well, or not, they deliver relative to the system, genre, and target audience. Then play more Brutal Legend. Demon's Souls...really? What am I missing here? Looks and feels like another laborious heavy handed FROM software game to me. Hard? Hardly; more like cheap. You want hard? Battletoads in Battlemaniacs; that's hard. Back to Brutal Legend... Brutal Legend...again. It's the gift that keeps on giving. Anyone see Tim Schafer on Jimmy Fallon BTW? It's about time major game releases got equal play. Chock one up for JF! Just er, no more yacht parties dude...

Casey Loe
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

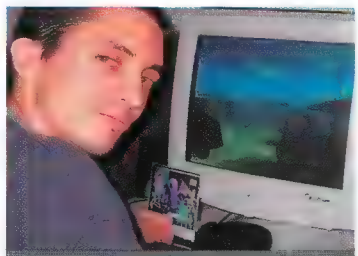
I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end. **Brain Drain:** I respect the passion of American Yakuza fans, but it might be time to stop begging Sega to localize the series. Yakuza 4 is going to be the fifth Yakuza series game in a little over 4 years, and what was shown at TGS confirms my fears that the series is creatively dead. Let's just be grateful we got the only legitimately innovative game in the series (the first) and write the franchise off. I doubt we'd find any satisfaction in these cranked-out, cookie-cutter sequels.
Ys Chronicles (PSP)

Brady Fiechter
EDITOR IN CHIEF

There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space).
Brain Drain: I tend to be of the opinion that I want a game to reveal its riches in the first hour or two, but then Batman comes along and grabs me midway through to show that we still have a lot to discover about pacing. And what's up with not being able to finish games lately? Too many good distractions out there right now... Stupid iPhone games! (Shorter, cheaper games please.)
Uncharted 2: Among Thieves.

Nick Des Barres
JAPAN EDITOR

Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe video games can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game. TGS... Still processing ...
Demon's Souls



Mike Griffin
PC EDITOR

I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me...
Brain Drain: For years it was two lead consoles, one dominant portable, and PC, with a couple of token underdog platforms on the brink of extinction. Now we have 7 very active platforms. And for the first time in history, you could yank the disc drive from every one of them and still access a massive games library.

Machinarium

Heather Anne Campbell
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.
SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV
Demon's Souls

Matt Cabral
EIC: Play Online

I can appreciate both score and score-less reviews, and believe they can absolutely coexist in our industry. I love to read—and often re-read—a well-written critique within the insightful pages of Play just as much as the next gamer. But sometimes, my Facebook-addicted, YouTube-surfing, iced coffee-swilling side craves the quick-hit satisfaction of a big fat number. Besides, have you ever tried reading a full review on an iPhone while driving? That's why playmagazine.com will host the same great review content from the magazine, with the addition of our classic 1-10 numbered scale. Plus, it gives us a voice on those sales-steering aggregate sites.
Given that I regularly have a towering stack of unfinished console and hand-held titles staring at me, begging to be completed, I vowed not to get sucked into the iPhone's App Store. Then Dexter came out. As a fan of Showtime's serial-killer-with-a-conscious series, I was forced to find time for yet another gaming platform. Thanks a lot, Steve Jobs!
Game of the Month: GTA: Chinatown Wars

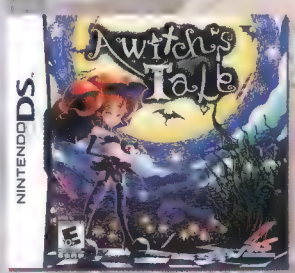
Eric L. Patterson
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked.
Heather has probably already convinced you, but seriously, Demon's Souls is pure awesomeness. I went into the game with casual interest and ended up getting totally sucked in. My other addiction in the past week has been Housou Musuko; such a wonderful but heartbreaking manga. Really wish somebody had the guts to bring it over. **Game of the Month:** Tie: Half-Minute Hero + Demon's Souls

NINTENDO DS™

A Witch's Tale™

It's a Nightmare Come True...



October 6, 2009!!

A Witch's Tale™

I'm Liddell!
I'm gonna be the best friggin' witch ever!

October 27, 2009!!

Atelier Annie™
Alchemists of Sera Island

Resort to Alchemy!

EVERYONE 10+
E 10+
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Animated Blood
Language
Mild Fantasy Violence
Mild Language
Suggestive Themes

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System: PS3 **Developer:** Naughty Dog **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Multi:** Vs, Co-Op **ESRB:** T **Available:** Oct 12, 2009

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves

Perfect Adventure Video-Game

words Heather Anne Campbell

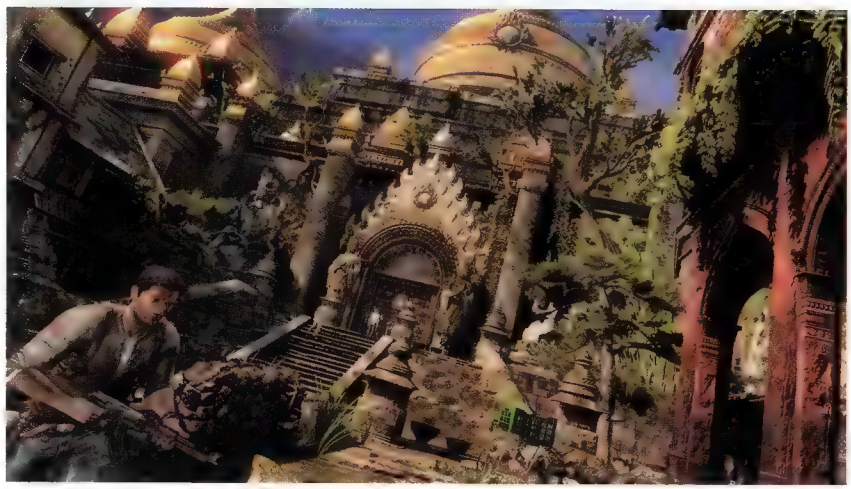
For me, the role of the critic is to teach me how I can make the next one better.
- Francis Ford Coppola

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves is a spectacular video-game. It s an interactive big-budget Hollywood movie, suffused with the soul of a pulp adventure novel. Drama, romance, and action fill every virtual inch of Uncharted's ten-plus hours, and the environment is rendered in stupidly gorgeous detail. The settings are well-researched, and the level design is evenly laid out, implying path without directing it. The music is satisfying a well-paced mix of familiar film score hits and World beats. The animation is unlike any game I ve played before, with hundreds of unique actions melded together into a rigorous flow. And though the game features a paint-by-numbers plot with few surprises, the characters which populate the world of Uncharted are well-written and *exceptionally* well-acted. The dialogue crackles with mirth and life. And the multiplayer offers endless variation on the Uncharted move set, by pitting the player against others just like him. This game is sugar.

Every review you read about Uncharted 2 will tell you the same things about it. It is the best of its kind. Top notch. But I d like to try something else, here.

Perhaps a red herring?

Adventure isn't just a checklist of foreign places; it's a spirit of discovery. Adventure is a threatening newness.



Let s say that it s a *given* that this game is a ten. It s perfect for what it is: a detailed, somewhat brief adventure, with locations and characters that sing with a sharp and market-tested voice. Uncharted is so slick that it s nearly impenetrable. It s like the team captain: skilled and invulnerable. So, we're going to nitpick. We're going to sit the team captain down and ask him a few questions. Now, at no point do we want this to come off as petty, or ungrateful, or imply any disappointment with the game. It s just that, when the formula we *have* has gotten this polished, it s time to look at the formula and say, "Well, what next?

See, every game can be a little bit better, and with Uncharted 2, it s the smallest of items that call for critique.

Nathan Drake stands amidst the gorgeous ruins of Nepal, his feet pitched over the stones of a war-torn city street. As gunfire echoes off the shell-shocked remains before him, he takes shelter behind a blown-out plaster wall. As a player, I pause. It won t be the last time.

By the time I complete hour ten of Among Thieves, I will have spent one-and-a-half hours standing still. The statistics at the end of my finished game give me a run-down of every interesting action I ve taken, or not taken, whether it be the number of head-shots I delivered (one-hundred-fifty-seven), or the number of hours I spent in cover (two and a half).

I spin the camera around Drake, checking out the ruined laundromat nearby manipulating

this camera will account for every minute of my one-and-a-half standing still hours. Sometimes I ll enter cinema-mode, by pressing up on the D-pad, just to remind me how breathtaking it is, how much Among Thieves recalls classic Hollywood matte paintings.

Everything around Drake is meticulously crafted, every texture seems unique, sharp, touchable. During my time in Nepal, Nate runs through a dilapidated apartment that empties into some virtual being s tiny sun-room and garden. It s a bit of personality, a *presence* in a location. These are the highlights of Uncharted 2 the endless number of bottles on someone s mantle, the unique photographs on their walls.

But here near the laundromat, as a far-off civil war coughs out bullet reports, I m saddled with a bit of melancholy:

Don t we have enough war games? Did Uncharted really need to visit the set of Metal Gears of War Killzone Solid: Resistance Haze?

The gunfights in Uncharted are crunchy and enjoyable, and giving them a large amphitheater to play out in was a no-brainer for Naughty Dog. But part of their draw in Drake s Fortune was the *unusual* locations to which they were tethered: Jungles littered with ancient ruins, caves sloped towards the edge of a waterfall. Now, while I can t recall a destroyed laundromat in another game, I can name a thousand devastated villages I ve gunned through. We ve played so many games that give us two pistols and press our backs up against a ruined city-scape. Did Nathan really need to go to Nepal?

Maybe I m miscalculating the strengths of Drake s Fortune, but for me, the joy of the original game was how much it made me want to travel. I wanted to see what Nate was seeing this, a testament to how well the environments were rendered. When we go to *new* places in Uncharted 2, I m giddy. When we re in an underground vault with sound bouncing off the cathedral ceilings, or when we re taking to villagers in a mountain-town, Uncharted 2 soars. But when Drake is fighting helicopters on a rooftop (Shadow Complex, etc.), or running around the skeleton of a train (Final Fantasy VII, off the top of my head), I can t help but think, I ve been here before. If Uncharted made me want to travel, there were several sections in its sequel where I realized that I was indoors, playing a video game again.

I m stuck between complaining about the plot and congratulating it for being so true to what it is. Sure, Uncharted 2 delivers on its promise: Be a great adventure video game. But as someone who was raised on *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Uncharted sometimes feels more like a re-enactment of the things I ve already experienced than its own unique course. When a game is only ten hours long, every scene that recalls something else is wasted. It s as if the team at Naughty Dog wanted to play the movies they d seen before, as opposed to pulling us into a world more unfamiliar. Adventure isn t just a checklist of foreign places; it s a spirit of discovery. Adventure is a threatening newness.

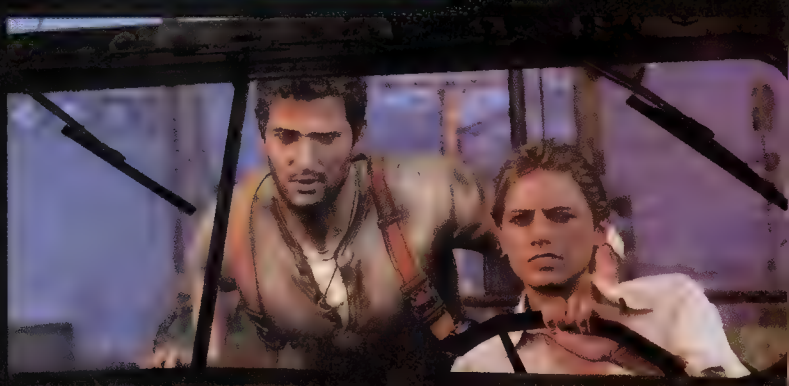
These small nitpicks are somehow heavier because the artistry of Uncharted 2 is so self-evident, so confident. For example, in a game with a nearly free camera, it was remarkable how often I let the developers set the camera for me, so I could look where they intended. The canted, Dutch angles on many of the ledges were fantastic, the framing lending a sense of vertigo that wouldn t have been present without great direction.

It is because of all these artistic strengths that the game s game logic is more obvious, more off-putting. A sequence wherein Drake escorts a wounded man to safety stands out as silly. How bad can this guy s single gunshot be, when Drake and his companions are shrugging off hundreds of rounds of wounds every minute? When a game gets so close to legitimizing our hobby to the rest of the world, it s elements like these that drag it back down. Why are there explosive gas barrels everywhere? Why are we fighting Yeti again? Why can't a game with such great dialogue also feature a clever plot? Worse: Why don t we get to *play* the game for longer sequences at a time? While watching yet another cut-scene, I found myself recalling something I d heard about television. Network TV is designed to keep us in our seats during commercials teleplays are a series of hooks that anchor us to the channel for the real programming: product pitches.

Similarly, the interactive sections of Uncharted 2 seemed just long enough to keep us glued to the controller while we took our medicine: Another video-game story. When a friend walks into the room and asks, Is this a different video-game, or the one you were playing last week? there s a problem of staleness in the whole industry.

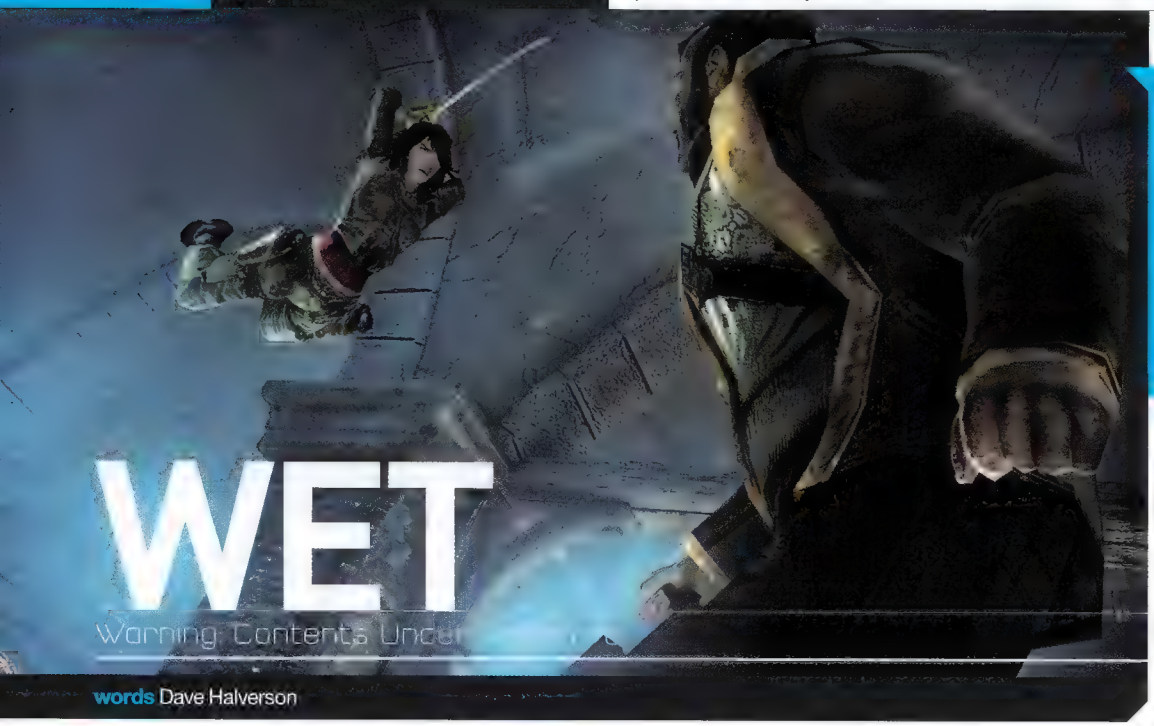
Uncharted 2: Among Thieves is indeed *perfect* for *what it is*. But that sentence, right there, is a poisoned praise. It s a condemnation, a hint that we ve got the formula down, but that formula is now ripe for change.

parting shot



Now things get serious.

System: Xbox 360 **Developer:** A2M **Publisher:** Bethesda **ESRB:** M **Available:** September



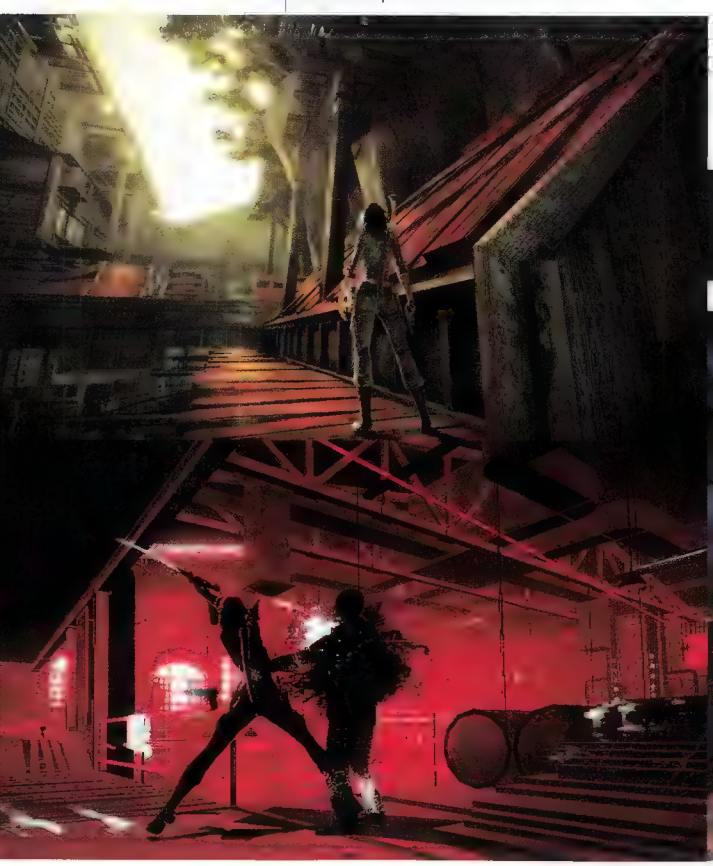
words Dave Halverson

Bullet Time isn't something you store in a gauge to use sparingly—it's a way of life, and everyone else's death.

I expected WET to deliver some quality acrobatics and crazy gunfights, and it most definitely does, but it's also an extremely beautiful game full of extraordinary effects, layer upon layer of detail as in above and beyond; there's some crazy tech in here—and a surprising amount of diversity, like Blood Rages, more of those incredible highway chases, and the coolest plane crash/freefall event ever. That I didn't expect.

Of course, the overall gist is definitely on the Bullet Time, only taken about as far as you can take it. In WET, BT isn't something you store in a gauge to use sparingly—it's a way of life, and everyone else's death. If you're firing a weapon, you're in BT, and this one bleeds all over the place. One of the most impressive achievements in WET is the blood, as it spurts or sprays (depending on the gun) in perfect harmony with the breach of every bullet...and then it stays there. What a mess. Rubi uses her ample acrobatic skills to negotiate an array of elaborate set pieces (each better than the last, A2M really go all out on selling each locale) that culminate in a series of progressively more intense gunfights, a.k.a. Arena Performances, where style is everything. You can plod through the first few levels in WET, but to truly get WET you must master the art of the Style Points Multiplier as well as Acrobatic Flow (chaining moves) and A2M's cool Split Targeting system. The better you perform, the more you score, and style points are the key to the moves that really open up the game. The art direction is also hot stuff. WET doesn't ape anything in particular, rather it's a mishmash of influences, some of which have no bearing on the core game, but in the end it's all about a good time, and if you're in the market for some balls-out, guns-blazing action, Rubi's the hottest ticket in town. I still don't get why it's called WET, but when Rubi falls into a body of water she emerges sopping wet, yet another detail that helps define the brand, if it indeed becomes one, and I don't see how it can miss. There's definitely room for improvement, like a little more finesse in Rubi's non-BT state, more access to Rubi's Boneyard abode, a few wardrobe changes wouldn't hurt, and a girl needs a shower after so many blood baths. play

parting shot



Quiet on another amazing set...for now. A2M really know how to treat a lady.

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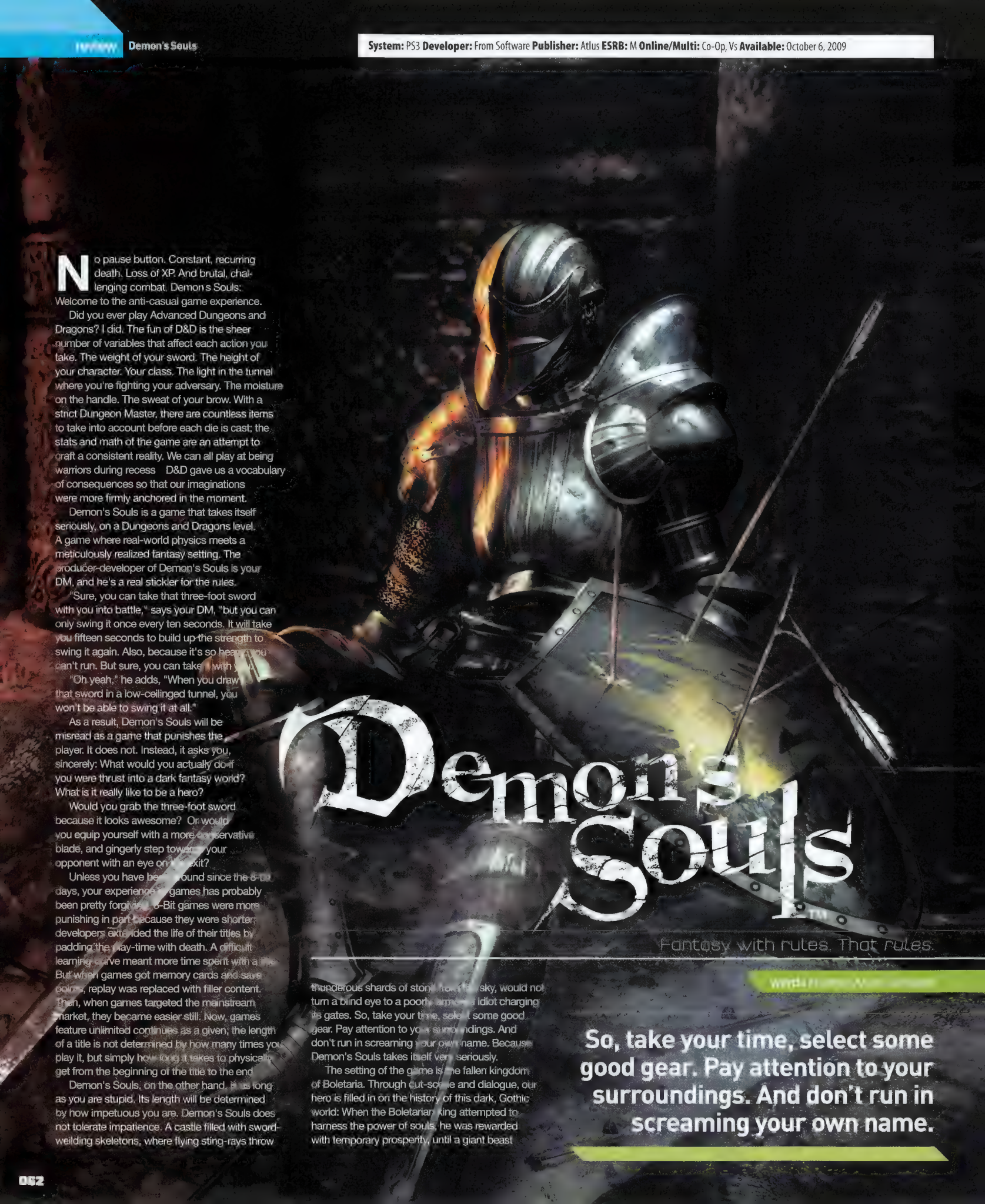
System: PS3 **Developer:** From Software **Publisher:** Atlus **ESRB:** M **Online/Multi:** Co-Op, Vs **Available:** October 6, 2009



No pause button. Constant, recurring death. Loss of XP. And brutal, challenging combat. Demon's Souls: Welcome to the anti-casual game experience.

Did you ever play Advanced Dungeons and Dragons? I did. The fun of D&D is the sheer number of variables that affect each action you take. The weight of your sword. The height of your character. Your class. The light in the tunnel where you're fighting your adversary. The moisture on the handle. The sweat of your brow. With a strict Dungeon Master, there are countless items to take into account before each die is cast; the stats and math of the game are an attempt to craft a consistent reality. We can all play at being warriors during recess D&D gave us a vocabulary of consequences so that our imaginations were more firmly anchored in the moment.

Demon's Souls is a game that takes itself seriously, on a Dungeons and Dragons level. A game where real-world physics meets a meticulously realized fantasy setting. The producer-developer of Demon's Souls is your DM, and he's a real stickler for the rules.

"Sure, you can take that three-foot sword with you into battle," says your DM, "but you can only swing it once every ten seconds. It will take you fifteen seconds to build up the strength to swing it again. Also, because it's so heavy, you can't run. But sure, you can take it with you."

"Oh yeah," he adds, "When you draw that sword in a low-ceilinged tunnel, you won't be able to swing it at all."

As a result, Demon's Souls will be misread as a game that punishes the player. It does not. Instead, it asks you, sincerely: What would you actually do if you were thrust into a dark fantasy world? What is it really like to be a hero?

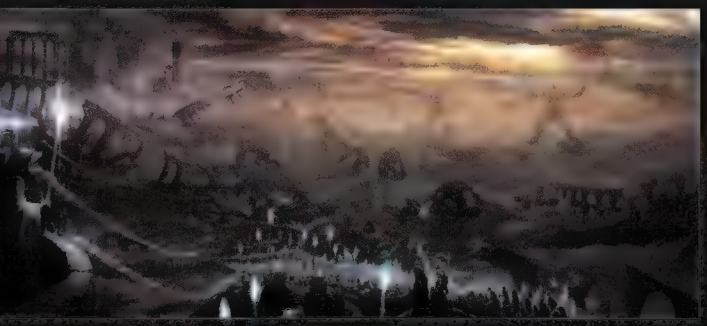
Would you grab the three-foot sword because it looks awesome? Or would you equip yourself with a more conservative blade, and gingerly step toward your opponent with an eye on the exit?

Unless you have been around since the 8-bit days, your experience with games has probably been pretty forgiving. 8-Bit games were more punishing in part because they were shorter; developers extended the life of their titles by padding the play-time with death. A difficult learning curve meant more time spent with a title. But when games got memory cards and save points, replay was replaced with filler content. Then, when games targeted the mainstream market, they became easier still. Now, games feature unlimited continues as a given; the length of a title is not determined by how many times you play it, but simply how long it takes to physically get from the beginning of the title to the end.

Demon's Souls, on the other hand, is as long as you are stupid. Its length will be determined by how impetuous you are. Demon's Souls does not tolerate impatience. A castle filled with sword-wielding skeletons, where flying sting-rays throw thunderous shards of stone from the sky, would not turn a blind eye to a poorly armored idiot charging its gates. So, take your time, select some good gear. Pay attention to your surroundings. And don't run in screaming your own name. Because Demon's Souls takes itself very seriously.

The setting of the game is the fallen kingdom of Boletaria. Through cut-scene and dialogue, our hero is filled in on the history of this dark, Gothic world: When the Boletarian king attempted to harness the power of souls, he was rewarded with temporary prosperity, until a giant beast

So, take your time, select some good gear. Pay attention to your surroundings. And don't run in screaming your own name.



known as the Old One awoke to punish him and his people. Now, the land is shrouded in a thick fog, and those who enter it never return.

Put yourself in that world. Go ahead, close your eyes, take a moment. What kind of warrior would you be? At the onset of the game, players choose between Knight, Priest, Thief, Magician, Temple Knight, Soldier, Wanderer, Barbarian, Royal, and Hunter. Each has specific strengths and gaping weaknesses; your choice in class determines how you're going to manage your greatest deficit for the next seventy hours. Additionally, a large set of visual sliders accompanies your character's birth you can make your adventurer look any way you wish, though it's unlikely that you'll see much of them under all that armor. Combat is mapped out to every button of the controller, and after being introduced to dodging, dashing, stabbing, thrusting, parrying, blocking, spells, arrows, equipment, your hero encounters his first boss and dies.

Because you would.

And don't try to cheat by pausing the game, or heading into your inventory to select a magical herb or a different weapon. There is no pausing in Demon's Souls. If you were facing down a tower knight, you wouldn't be able to say to him, "Hold on, I want to look through my bag for a second." See, Demon's Souls is the Velveteen Rabbit of video-games: It wants to be real more than anything in the world.

Amidst this stoicism and difficulty is a grand set of interesting features and novel ideas. Firstly, the game takes place online, always. Demon's Souls is not an MMO, but the shadows of fellow adventurers can be glimpsed running along the same corridors, battling enemies and getting slain. You can leave messages for them on the ground, and they have done so for you; a blind cliff might carry a glowing warning about the fall, a well-hidden merchant might be hinted at with a message about a Good Guy lurking nearby. When you're about to encounter a trap, you'll know. The question, of course, is where the trap is, exactly.

For more clarity about your predicament, you can examine the blood-stains on the ground. Each will conjure a ghostly replay of another adventurer's death, giving you a greater understanding of where the enemy might lay in wait. In other words, unless you want to be dying all the time, check out where everyone else already did.

Particularly difficult sections can be attempted with some assistance. Fellow warriors will leave summon-stones along their path, and can be transported to your world for a brief time to help you explore and fight. You cannot talk to them. They are anchored in their own adventure. Moreover the designers probably realized that the sound of a homophobic twelve-year-old would ruin the thick atmosphere of Demon's Souls. Thank God you can't talk to them.

Even with help, the game is strict. Each time you die, you leave behind every soul you've collected on your adventure. Souls are currency, and are cashed out in the hub-world, called The Nexus, for armor upgrades and leveling. The level resets, and every enemy you've trounced (carefully, carefully) re-spawns ready to fight. You can reclaim your souls if you make it all the way back to your body without dying again, but chances are you'll get greedy and forget just how punishing this game is. What's more, the friends who helped you out in your last battle may return to attack you, if they choose. Because the only thing that could be more treacherous than this game on its own is this game on its own with another human being hunting you down.

So, with all of this in consideration, is the game fun? The answer is a resounding yes. Yes, yes, a thousand times yes. There is nothing insurmountable about Demon's Souls it just has a ruthless DM. Because each challenge *can* be overcome, you *want* to overcome it. You thirst for victory. The feeling of accomplishment when you down an enemy that has kept you at bay is so rich, so heavy, that it satisfies like nothing else. And when you return to the worlds you've beaten with great gear and a backpack full of stats, you'll take such pleasure from slaying the foes who posed such a threat before.

For long-time readers of Play, I'll put it this way: typically, I play Street Fighter for a couple hours every day. For the last two weeks, I've spent that time playing five hours of Demon's Souls instead. The greatest dread I have now is that I have to start all over again when it hits retail. I won't be able to get any of those souls back, and that's a greater punishment than anything I've experienced in this extraordinary title.

There's no avoiding death...

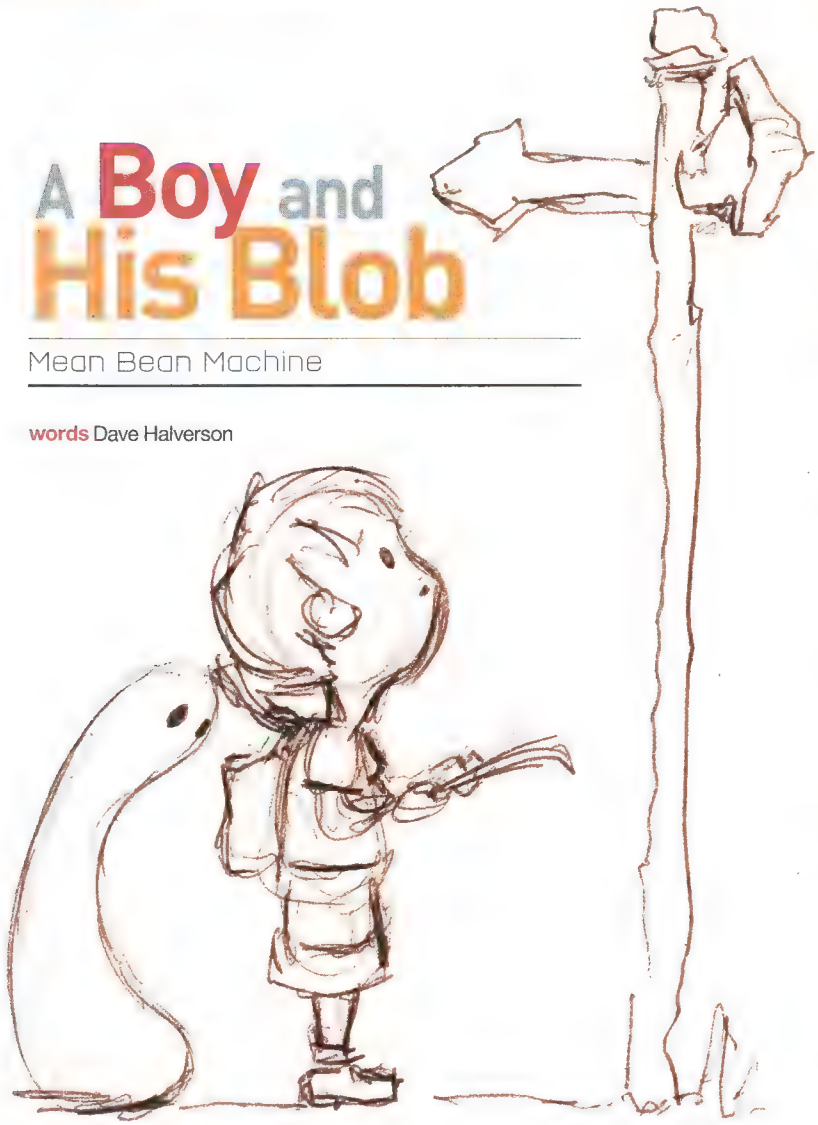
parting shot

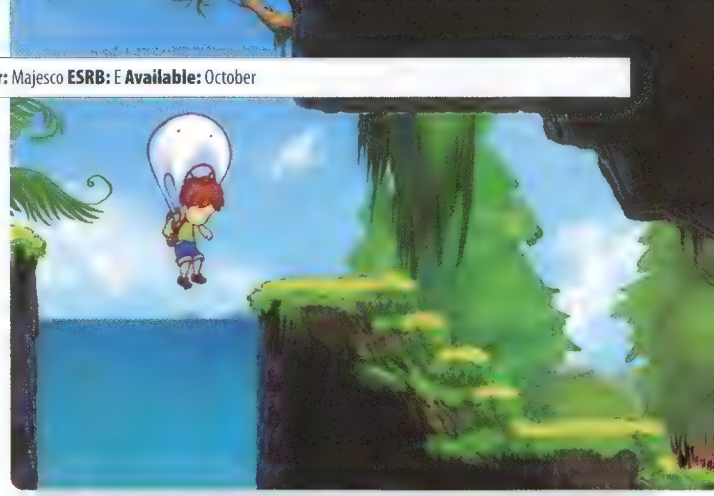
System: Wii **Developer:** WayForward **Publisher:** Majesco **ESRB:** E **Available:** October

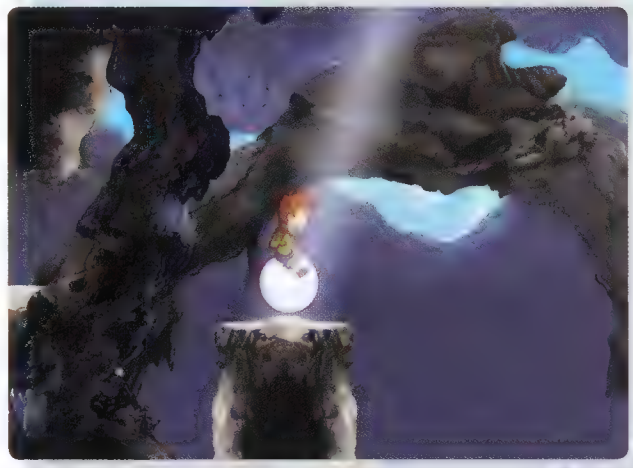
A Boy and His Blob

Mean Bean Machine

words Dave Halverson







Let s take a minute to consider the plight of the blob. Aside from a really (really, really) old horror/sci-fi movie about a gelatinous invader that eats everyone it comes in contact with the only one other allusion to the wiggly wunderkind I can recall other than the Whamo-O Super Stuff I let dry on the rug when I was a wee lad—is the interrogation scene in *Ghostbusters II* where Ray and Egon rail against an unsuspecting wad of goo, casting such aspersions as You ignorant disgusting blob! and You re nothing but an unstable short-chained molecule! And shame on them; for all they knew it could have been one of Slimers relatives. Just another day in the oppressed life of an amorphous organism. They say every dog has its day, and for Blob-kind, that day has arrived.

The video game world should stand up and take notice of the way A Boy and His Blob gets underway and is presented overall. If there's one aspect of the game that sets it apart (and well above) its puzzle action counterparts, it's the presentation. The events of A Boy and His Blob unravel as if you, the player, are the boy. Not in the video game sense, but in the game's own plausible reality. Awakened by a loud crash, the Boy runs outside where he eventually discovers a strange little gelatinous E.T.—to which their ensuing reactions pay direct homage emerging from the crash site. After warming up to the little fellow (pressing up on the D-Pad produces perhaps the sweetest moment in all of gaming), it's patently unclear what to do next. There's no subtext, not a whisper, and not a single screen prompt of any kind. Pause the game and all you get is the word "pause." There's no menu, no settings, no control tutorial no nada. You are on your own. Wii Remote in one hand and Nunchuck in the other, it's now time for you to THINK, explore and discover, with a little help from your wiggly new jellybean loving BFF, whose ability to transform comes in mighty handy. But that s for you to discover as you make your way through the supremely imaginative world at hand via the addictive, at times utterly hypnotic gameplay. As sweet as A Boy and His Blob appears to be, and is much of the time, the overall sentiment is reminiscent of Ico or Prince of Persia—sweet and melancholy with a sense of pervasive evil, only in a much more innocent cartoon milieu. And that's what A Boy and His Blob really is: a living cartoon. The animation is simply gorgeous, and while the backgrounds aren't always as lush or layered as they could be, they re richly colored and drawn, and occasionally wonderfully lit. If you own a Wii you absolutely must experience this game, if for no other reason than to discover (or rediscover) the quintessence of gaming—the joy of discovery. So shut down the computer, mute whatever devices have come to define you, and rediscover the "boy" that dwells inside us all. play

You're not armed but he's definitely-dangerous...

parting shot

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MADE IN THE U.S.A

System: Xbox 360 **Developer:** Bungie **Publisher:** Microsoft **ESRB:** M **Available:** September 22

Halo 3: ODST

The single-player campaign is arguably the biggest shift in gameplay Bungie has ever shown in the series.

Since it's [illegible]out, Halo 3: ODST hasn't made much sense. Bungie split from parent company Microsoft specifically to create games other than Halo; but its first solo game? Halo 3: ODST. Originally called Halo Recon, the name sent mixed messages to people who, not incorrectly, thought it was a stealth game (can you say, Ghost Recon?). Microsoft quickly changed the name, but the new moniker, Halo 3: ODST is more than a mouthful, and it begs more questions than it answers. Why the 3? And what does ODST mean?

Nearly everything is answered in the game's first five minutes. Star Wars-like text drops across a starry background and sets the time table; and the opening cutscene, a spectacularly handled piece of production, sets the tone. Halo 3 takes place [illegible] gaps and giving fans what they have wanted since Halo 2—more play time on Earth. Orbital Drop Shock Troopers are high-risk marines called in for especially difficult missions, and you play the silent ODST "Rookie." Any other doubts are answered by the gameplay itself. Although different from its predecessors, it turns out Halo 3: ODST is an exceptional first-person shooter whose strengths are its differences, and whose overall quality might, in fact, exceed those of its predecessor.

Bungie's title comprises a single-player campaign that lasts anywhere from 5-8 hours depending on your skill level (which can be changed to Easy, Normal, Heroic, or Legendary on the fly), and like Halo 3, can be played cooperatively with up to three others. The campaign, along with Firefight, a new four-

/// ORBITAL DROP SHOCK TROOPERS ///

player cooperative survival mode, is joined by a Theater option on disc 1. Disc 2 contains custom modes Forge and Theater, and 24 Halo 3 multiplayer maps, three of which are brand new. Also, by purchasing Halo 3: ODST you'll also get a special invitation to the Halo Reach multiplayer beta coming next year.

The single-player campaign is arguably the biggest shift in gameplay Bungie has ever shown in the series. As an ODST, you won't have an overshield, hidden health packs are hard to come by, and you're short on both weapons and ammo. This means that instead of running, gunning, and jumping out of man-cannons with reckless abandon, you'll play cautiously, conserving ammo, and employing guerrilla tactics. Equipped with a silenced submachine gun, Halo 1's M6S silenced magnum pistol, and a visor for the night-time setting, Bungie forces you to play better with less. The result, although contrary to initial reactions, is a surprisingly tight experience that creates an intelligent tension between attacking and retreating, and immersing yourself in the urban landscape.

Building on this tense design is the massive, open street structure of new Mombasa. Once you meet the Superintendent, the AI that runs the city's operations, you receive a top-down map that highlights mission objectives, allies and enemies, and city structures—a number of which are purposely darkened to promote exploration. As the Rookie, you're pushed to locate the most recent location of your squad mates, each of whom has left some item behind: a broken gun, a helmet, Trojanz, whatever. During this search you explore the city freely. You're encouraged to seek out data terminals, which re-tell "Sadie's Story," a sub-narrative that captures the chaos of one woman's life as the Covenant invades the city through still shots in your visor. Sadie's Story adds nuance to ODST story, but unless you're an Achievement freak, it's not terribly rewarding.

Once you've found a teammate item, however, you'll then play through one or more linear flashback sequences as one of five characters giving you different weapon options (sniper, missile launcher, flame-thrower, etc.) and distinct locales you won't see as the Rookie. The flashback missions add a welcome variety to the primary missions, enabling you to man UNSC Warthogs, Scorpions, and Mongooses; and Covenant Banshees, Ghosts, Wraiths, and Choppers. The single-player campaign is short if you're bent on just getting to the end. But if you want to find all of the data terminals and explore, add another two hours to the total.

Like any Halo game, the multiplayer experience is vital to the experience (in fact, some people just skip the campaign altogether). Firefight is Bungie's version of survival mode.

One to four players cooperatively play with a limited amount of lives through endless waves of Covenant attacks, which increase in difficulty each wave, for high scores. Aside from the campaign's significant shift, this is the biggest addition to ODST, and it's tough, exhilarating, and addicting. In Firefight, you'll spend endless hours endlessly chattering to friends where enemies are heading, where to find ammo, all the while counting your precious remaining lives. Firefight is best played with friends (especially at your own skill level), rather than strangers, who can ruin the experience real quickly.

The multiplayer portion is hardly new. But Halo's enormously popular MP didn't really need reinventing. Like Halo 3 before it, 2 to 16 players will tromp through a handful of game types—VIP, Oddball, Slayer, and Capture the Flag to name a few—using Bungie's improved matchmaking lobby. You'll get Heretic (a small to medium re-make of Halo 2's Midship), the perfect-for-eight-player Citadel, and the large-scale Longshore, which is great for 16-player capture the flag. The rest should sound familiar: You'll earn experience and ratings by killing other players—and winning—in ranked and unranked matches. play

parting shot

System: Xbox 360 (XBLA) **Developer:** Introversion Software **Publisher:** Introversion Software/Microsoft **Available:** November

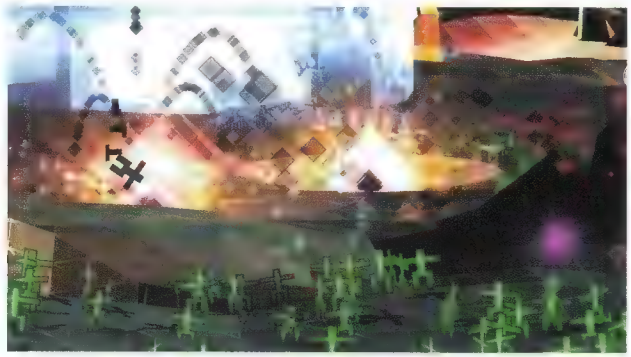
Darwinia+

Sepulveda's transcendental retreat

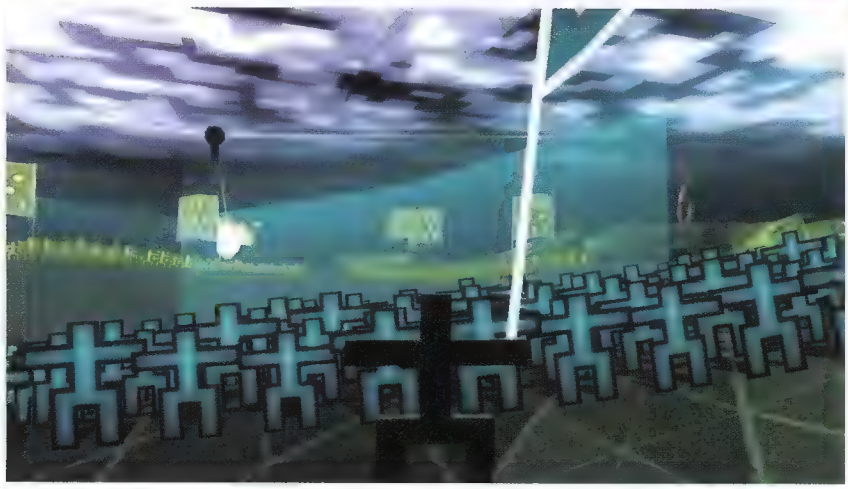
words Mike Griffin

As soon as those crunchy 8-bit inflected tunes start playing during the Darwinia+ intro sequence, camera swooping through the matrix of Dr. Sepulveda's virtual themepark, you can feel the strings of retro homage tugging at your nostalgic heart. I'd love to be in the shoes of console players experiencing Introversion's excellent and nuanced RTS hybrid for the first time on Xbox Live Arcade, as I can recall my own maiden voyage into the original Darwinia a few years ago, smitten by striking fractal worlds and clever objectives and pleasantly surprised by the soul of the story.

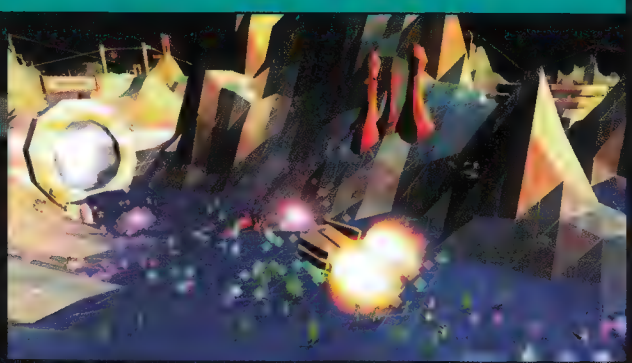
With Darwinia+, Xbox 360 owners get the ultimate vision of this series, arriving as a 2-in-1 game that includes both Darwinia and its multiplayer successor, Multiwinia. The title screen is literally split in half, ready to provide a lengthy and enjoyable campaign in Darwinia to the right, and multi-human competitive chaos in Multiwinia to the left. Combined as they are in D+, the low purchase price yields a great deal of value.



Making fractals fun, for the very first time!



The accumulated intensity of dozens of violent, flat bastards...



As game player in the role of network user, the Darwinia campaign sets you to the task of bringing peace to a world of evolved, newly self-aware virtual beings called Darwinians—our flat green heroes, the experiment in progress. Using offensive Squads with classic shooter-like control, collector drones (to gather the digital essence of slain foes and harvest it into more Darwinians), transports and gun batteries, the campaign moves through objectives like repairing pattern buffers, firing up containment generators, and ultimately conquering a virus at its source. The adaptation of control to Xbox 360, ever an important consideration for strategy titles, has been handled rather well. The process of creating units, group selection, placing waypoints, and transmitting your green fellows between islands (by aligning satellites) is very easy to get to grips with.

Control was a special concern for me going into Darwinia+, knowing that a botched result could gravely diminish multiplayer in Multiwinia. Thankfully this isn't the case, and Multiwinia, which didn't attain the success of its predecessor on PC, may finally secure a substantial online community via Xbox Live. Featuring several thematic variations of popular real-time strategy modes, like King of the Hill and Capture the Flag (here it's a huge statue), Multiwinia's 2-on-2 gameplay is accessible and less complex and time consuming than most competitive RTS offerings. Yet the accumulated intensity of dozens of violent, flat bastards tends to peak in wild spectacles of digital doom.

Darwinia has never looked better. Creative mastermind and programmer Chris Delay has been consistently enhancing the engine for years on PC, employing updated Direct X effects and libraries. This diligence paid off on 360, and transitioning to a living room experience to absorb the game's vibrant colors and shimmering fractal landscapes on a big screen (with menacing ambient sound and punchy effects in 5.1) is a superior experience, secured by a consistently high frame rate.

Darwinia+ has taken much longer to get to console than originally planned, side-tracked by external scheduling and marketing hijinks; dubious treatment for one of this decade's most acclaimed indie titles. But it's here now, and I recommend looking into it. Introversion could use the assist, and we certainly need more Introversion games. play

parting shot

System: Xbox 360 **Developer:** Turn 10 Studios **Publisher:** Microsoft **Online:** 1-8 **ESRB:** E **Available:** October 27

FORZA MOTORSPORT 3

Car-gasmic

words Matt Cabral

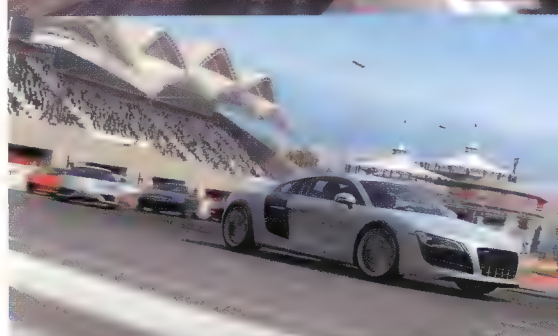
I d ordinarily begin a positive racing game review with a light vehicular reference such as buckle up or start your engines. But seeing this season has already taken gamers around the track with excellent entries in the Dirt and Need for Speed series, I ll assume fans of the genre are already strapped in with engines running hot. So, in recommending Turn 10 s latest lap, I ll offer the decidedly less exciting please remain in your vehicle.

While that may sound more like the demand of a stick-up-his-butt state trooper than an endorsement for Forza Motorsport 3, it s exactly what racing fanatics will want to do. Even after spending countless hours with Codemasters and Electronic Arts recent racers, this 360 exclusive continues to keep me behind the wheel. As someone who prefers arcadey controls over realistic navigation I d rather down a can of motor oil than play Gran Turismo the Forza series, despite its accessibility options, has previously kept me at arm s length. Forza 3, however, further blurs the line between pick-up-and-play and strict simulation, offering options and difficulty settings that ll appeal to everyone from gear-heads to tykes that just want to have their Lightening McQueen moment.

The beauty of Forza 3 is its ability to offer something for race fans of all stripes

In addition to assists ranging from auto-braking to self-tuning, Forza 3's career tailors itself to specific play styles; based on your skill (or lack there of), vehicle and event preferences, it actually creates a personalized career path. Further accessibility-amping appeal comes in the form of AI scaled to your skill level and a rewind option allowing you to erase your most windshield-shattering mistakes. While all this hand-holding probably makes Forza 3 sound as appealing as a kiddie kart racer to dedicated fans, remember that everything is scalable, so daunting realism and dizzying depth is still an option for the purists. In fact, if you re into the customization and community stuff, you could get your money s worth from this two-disc offering without ever leaving the garage.

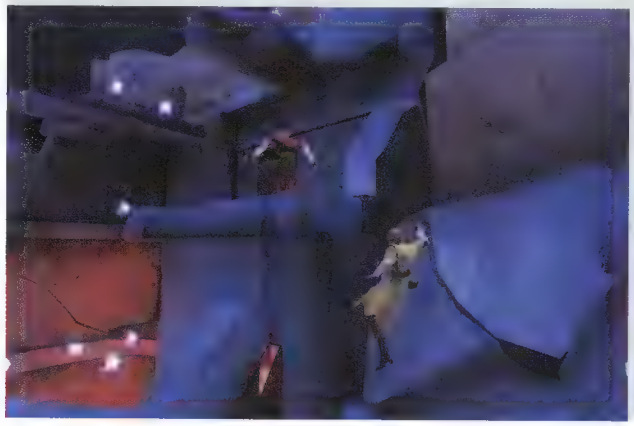
Personally, I'd rather vacuum the petrified fast food french fries from the floor of my '99 Jeep Cherokee than decal virtual cars. But again, the beauty of Forza 3 is its ability to offer something for race fans of all stripes. For me, it s about tooling around in hot cars, not worrying how heavy my foot is, and taking in some of the prettiest visuals the genre s ever seen. From the physical damage displayed to the detailed cockpit views, this one s a polygon-pushing powerhouse I was tempted to ap-proach my HD display thinking I might be able to catch my reflection in the pristine paint jobs of the scary-real rides. Forza 3 satisfied my fix for sexy rides and pedal-to-the-metal thrills, but others will find it just as appealing for its racing realism and under-the-hood accuracy. Regardless of your particular car porn preference, Forza 3 should fulfill all your lead-foot fantasies. play



You wish you had this car.

parting shot

System: PS2, PSP, Wii, Xbox 360, PS3, Windows **Developer:** Krome Studios **Publisher:** LucasArts **ESRB:** T **Available:** Now



Star Wars The Clone Wars: Republic Heroes

May the blue orbs be with you

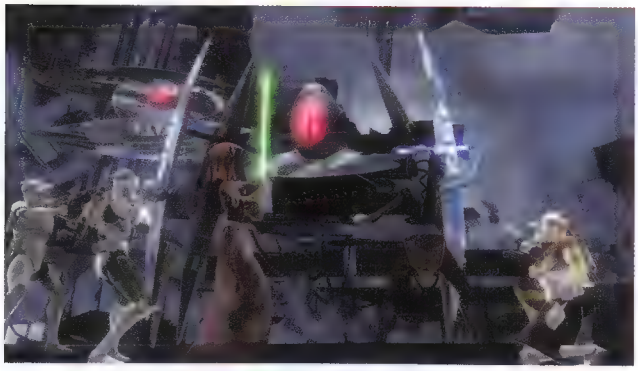
words Dave Halverson

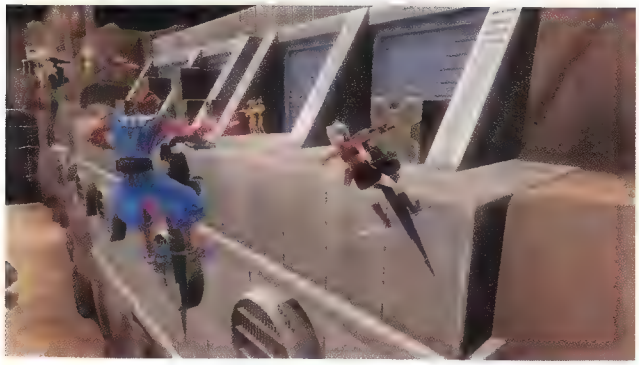
As hard to believe as it may seem, the number of Star Wars games released on console and portable game systems *alone* is pushing…60. Sixty games in the name of a franchise regularly deemed lacking by its most ardent fans and critics alike with an aggregate score that borders on average. As Brian Fellows would say: "That's crazy!"

Crazier still is that out of those 60 I can only recall liking 11: the three "Super" games on SNES, Rogue Squadron on N64 and GameCube, Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast on Xbox, Pandemic's two Battlefront games (also on Xbox), Ubi Montreal's Lethal Alliance for PSP, and Force Unleashed on 360 & PS3, out of which I'd have actually purchased the SNES games, Rogue Squadron on N64, Alliance, and Unleashed. A mere six out of 60, but that's just me. Your average Star Wars fan is another story entirely. This is a person that was still whining about how crap the previous "Episode" was three years later camped out on the sidewalk (again) for the next, debating the use of anamorphic lenses versus Panavision with a guy dressed like a giant Ewok. The main theme alone causes these people to simultaneously freeze and produce a credit card—how hard can it be to sell 'em a few games? But like all good things, sagas too come to an end. What's a 22-billion dollar space opera franchise to do after the fat Hutt sings? Easy, go after their kids!

What's a 22-billion dollar space opera franchise to do after the fat Hutt sings?

Aayla and Luminara get down to Jedi business on Alzoc III; Republic Heroes' best level.





Fooled you he has, suck you dry till your last breath he will. At least they're getting a cool TV series…very cool in fact. I'll take season 1 of Clone Wars over anything after Empire. I only wish I could say the same for its first big adventure game.

Republic Heroes pits the series' manga-tastically stylized Jedi and Clone Troopers against Darth Sidious's resident goons and goonettes in intersecting scenarios of dos Jedi action, with either the AI or a player two joining *your* action …Anakin and Ahsoka (if only their levels were as sharp as their playful banter), Obi-Wan and Plo koon, Mace Windu and Kit Fisto, Luminara and Aaylan—the gang's all here along with the Clones whose arcade-style dual-analog shoot 'em up stages might steal the show (you even get to ride AR-RTs) if only there were one to steal. The first few levels of Republic Heroes are to game design what Jar Jar Binks is to character design... crap. Either the once proud king of Aussie developers lost their talent pool to a rabid Koala uprising, or somebody in the chain of command thinks the average 8-13 year old has the IQ of a pine cone. Because confined fixed perspective rail running is so confusing, Krome have decided to light your way with a continuous stream of bright blue orbs that conveniently act as currency to purchase various items and upgrades in the game's store. Not that Yoda doesn't interrupt constantly to provide useful hints—like what the red arrow pulsating over the yellow Y button prompt by the big green circle means. He does, ad nauseum, and you can't turn him off, but that just wasn't enough. Moving from right to the left is just that complex, so follow the orbs you must. What they really need is a visual indicator for the ceaseless deluge of perspective miscues that transform rudimentary gameplay into an exercise in tedium.

Off the rails (and sometimes on) lining up your Jedi for a simple jump can be an excruciatingly frustrating endeavor, especially when a simple double-jump would (or at least should) get you where you're going. Playing the game instinctually, however, simply isn't an option and like Colin McCloud you cannot die, so it's either follow the orbs and obey the prompts or watch yourself respawn, forever. Whatever transpired to goad Krome into such a paranoid design, what could have been a descent game is lost in the process. There are some good ideas here too. The Crash: Mind over Mutant-style Droid-jacking for one is great…when it's not marred by screwy AI. At times you have to actually lure your AI character away or they'll literally stop your game by hacking away at droids you need to jack in order to advance. Don't bother buying the cool dance routines that transform marauding droids into a chorus line either. Your AI counterpart also hates dancing droids. Speaking of smashing things, Republic Heroes' altogether basic light saber combat doesn't do the namesake any favors either. It's decent but compared to the likes of Force Unleashed…it doesn't. Leaving only the AT-RT and STAP shooting stages (on 360 at least, the STAP bits are butchered on Wii along with the cool hacking puzzles) Clone Trooper battles, and a few select scenarios to celebrate; namely Aayla and Luminara's platforming stint among the cliffs and floating debris on Alzoc III, capped off by a showdown with Asajj Ventress. Somebody call the WWE, this one has potential. If only the live action would have mustered villains like this I may have pitched a tent too...Nah.

All things considered, you'd think the game's visuals would pick up the slack—this is a Star Wars game after all—and while the models look great and emote well by Wii standards, the overall tech is strictly PS2, and on 360…well, let's just say the Force is nowhere to be found. play

parting shot

System: PS3, 360, PC **Developer:** Vicarious Visions **Publisher:** Activision **ESRB:** T **Available:** Now

Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2

Pick a side

It s got to be pretty daunting to suit up in a cape, cowl, or codpiece, and put yourself in front of gamers that have just had their minds blown by Batman: Arkham Asylum. But following the best comic book character-inspired title ever is the unfortunate fate Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2 faces pretty tall order, even for 24 of Marvel s most iconic heroes.

Thankfully, MUA2 isn t looking to cover the same ground as the brooding Bat; where Arkham was all solitary and cinematic, Vicarious Visions sequel to the additive superhero-packed action/RPG is about grouping with other day-savers (AI or real-life super friends) and arcadey action. It s essentially a dungeon crawler that replaces the hacking, slashing and spell-casting with the specific villain-thwarting powers of Marvel's stable of do-gooders. As with the first game, you ll utilize a variety of ranged and melee attacks to tear through swarms of baddies, level-up your heroes, and switch on the fly between the likes of Iron Man, Captain America, Spider-man, Wolverine, Hulk, and a whole bunch of others that ll only be familiar to comic book convention attendees.

The gameplay and even the visuals are a bit too similar to what we got three years ago, but a few significant tweaks make it worth donning the spandex all over again. For one, the Civil War-based storyline is far more engaging than MUAs barely-there narrative. Having to align with pro- or anti-registration forces later in the game also effectively weaves the story into the gameplay. Additionally, Fusion abilities that see two characters combine their powers for a double dose of ass-whupping, are a blast infuse Wolvy s adamantium slicers with Stark s repulsor rays if you really wanna see the bad guys brown their underoos.

MUA2's realistic environments are also more fun to fight in than the first game's more fantastical settings. Tearing a city a new one with Thor s hammer is far more satisfying than swinging it at sea horses in some underwater lair. No doubt some will see these changes as small attempts to put a new spin on an old formula. But even in the blinding glow of the Bat signal, I found MUA2 a worthwhile take on the comic book-based genre. **Matt Cabral**

parting shot

System: PS3, 360, PC **Developer:** Codemasters **Publisher:** Codemasters **Rating:** M **Available:** October 6

Operation Flashpoint Dragon Rising

Brains over booyah!

If it weren't for Codemasters' logo closing their Think You re Ready? trailer, hyping the publisher s new FPS Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising, you might mistake the clip for an armed forces recruitment campaign. But I m guessing the marketing strategy is intentional, as the latest entry in the cerebral war sim is as close as you ll ever want to get to the real thing.

Sure, you ve seen the words realistic, authentic and accurate included in back-of-the-box bullet point descriptions for countless modern military shooters. But Operation Flashpoint really means it. This is not the summer movie-like experience, supported by carefully scripted moments and slick set pieces, of the Call of Duty franchise. Don t misunderstand, you still get highly produced screen-stretching explosions, bullet-whizzing firefights, and ear-rattling audio cues; it's just that in this game, you re called to act rather than react.

The gameplay, which encourages thoughtful strategy as much as sharp reflexes, incorporates a free-form style that affords the player unprecedented liberty in terms of how they choose to tackle objectives. The amount of tactical options and squad commands, selected through intuitive radial menus, allows you to plan and execute missions with a depth rarely seen in this genre. It's definitely more mentally taxing than blowing-up fuel barrels or scrambling for a cover spot so your magic shield can regenerate, but the reward of knowing you put some evil-doer down because your brain was on the same page as your trigger finger, is enormously rewarding. Your sharp-as-a-tack AI squad mates (and enemies), strategy-influencing smoke and fire effects, and a real-world arsenal that'd turn Tom Clancy greener than Gumby with envy, also aid in cranking the adrenaline beyond any doctor recommended levels.

My only complaint is that ultra-realism, while intense and addictive, isn t always as much fun as just popping head-shots. You 'll definitely need to be in the proper mindset to truly appreciate Operation Flashpoint s decidedly non-run-and-gun approach. Of course, if you want a break from the psychological pressure, you can always have a buddy take point in the excellent full-campaign co-op mode. **Matt Cabral**

parting shot

System: PSP **Developer:** Marvelous Ent. / Opus Studio **Publisher:** XSEED Games **ESRB:** Everyone 10+ **Available:** Now

Half-Minute Hero

Your ticket to 30 seconds of fame

words Eric L. Patterson

When we say goodbye to 2009 and the video games press takes its look back on the best titles of the year, accolades for the game that brought true excitement, creativity, and uniqueness will no doubt be heaped upon media darling Scribblenauts.

And, rightly so: it is a game that I thought was fabulous, and which deserves all of the praise it has received. My vote, however, may now no longer be able to be tossed into its pile.

The reason for that is that I've fallen passionately in love with Half-Minute Hero. Not the platonic kind of love that one can find themselves feeling for a game they've come to enjoy, but a deeper, more heart-felt love – the kind where you leave the PSP turned on at night, sitting beside your bed, so that you can fall asleep in the comfort of the screen's soft glow as the game's soundtrack sings to you like a lullaby.

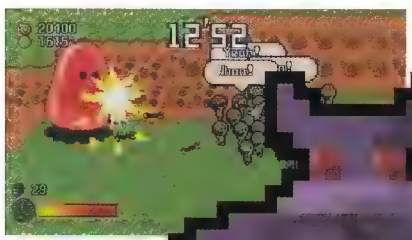
Maybe this is because Half-Minute is the best of two worlds: an action RPG that plays to the youth of today and their impatience for games that don't offer instant gratification, and an homage to the history of the Japanese take on the genre that both makes fun of the stereotypes and customs we've come to expect while also wrapping itself in them.

In Half-Minute's main mode, our hero – named by default, unsurprisingly, "Hero" – is pitted against a cavalcade of ne'er-do-wells, all intent on casting a spell taught to them by a nefarious magician. The spell will bring total annihilation to the world, and takes but thirty seconds to cast.

I have, again and again, bemoaned Japanese RPGs for including the "stop the baddie in time" segments where in reality I could explore around, do some levelling, play a mini game or two, and still magically make it before the imaginary doomsday clock ran out. Here, somebody had the crazy idea to take that one simple plot device and create an entire game around it.

The fast-paced, heart-pounding "Hero" quest line is only one of the many game modes to be found in Half-Minute Hero. It, and its companions – a "shooter" mode, a real-time strategy mode, and a few other goodies you'll have to unlock – all have clear, basic concepts behind them, but the brilliant execution of (most of) those concepts is what keeps Half-Minute enjoyable and entertaining for the countless number of minutes you'll be spending with it.

Ridiculously charming, immensely engaging, and with more character depth than a lot of "real" RPGs, Half-Minute Hero may not have the hype that Scribblenauts had, but damn it, it absolutely deserves it. play



Slime: scourge of the RPG world!

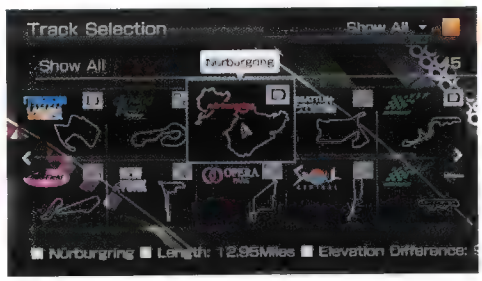
I've fallen passionately in love with Half-Minute Hero.

parting shot

review **System:** PSP **Developer:** Polyphony Digital **Publisher:** SCEA **ESRB:** E **Available:** October

Gran Turismo PSP

Check your engine



Kazunori Yamauchi really, *really* wants you to have a portable driving experience with his new Gran Turismo. After years of being shown in various forms at E3 and other shows, what was once the spiritual counterpart to GT5 Prologue has finally hit the streets.

But you might want to kick those tires before you take it out on the track – at least, depending on your level of loyalty and disposition towards the series. Because this one's sort of a hybrid between the Prologue and the now-distant GT4.

The frothing fans will appreciate the huge selection of cars and tracks (around 800 and 70, respectively) and for better or worse, GT plays exactly how you'd expect, especially if you expect GT4. However, and here's where the portable element comes in, this comes at the cost of a real career mode, and races being limited to four cars per to keep the game running at 60 FPS. Tweaking parts is kept to a minimum, and like Prologue, you can't upgrade your car, robbing you of the chance to fine-tune your POS into an asphalt-tearing monster.

What's left is your pick of single races, drift events and (tough) driving challenges that'll make you a pro should you master them. This is GT on the go, which in and of itself is almost an oxymoron. But if you're a fan, that may not matter. GT still offers a great driving package, just one stripped of some of its more hardcore parts. **Steve Haske**

parting shot

[redacted]

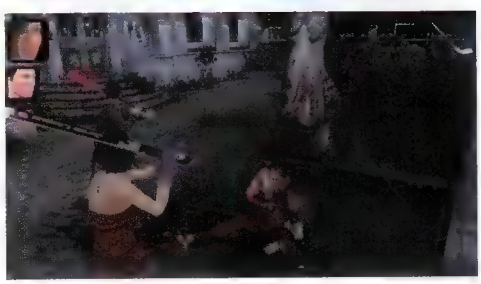
review **System:** PSP **Developer:** HydraVision/Play Logic **Publisher:** Ignition Ent. **ESRB:** M **Avail:** Sept. 29

ObsCure: the Aftermath

Hybrid of horror

Given the popularity of the SH category I'm surprised there aren't more games along the lines of ObsCure: the Aftermath. Not that it allays any conventions, but it certainly owns its teen slasher veneer incredibly well. And here I thought incidents like this only happened in underground bunkers and Japanese prefectures. The resident strain from hell in ObsCure crashes a college campus thus joining resident evil style exploration/scavenging /code breaking/undead bashing and teenage slasher flick cheese sauce in unholy matrimony... You may now kill the bride.

The result? Surprisingly good and highly addictive I'm happy to say and I'm no fan of RE. Quite the contrary; I've always considered it predictable and trite, where I can relate to this. OtA is played in tandem switching between the guy/girl protagonists making use of their natural abilities – Amy is the resident smokin' blonde only with a brain – there's a twist; Corey's a skater so count on him for any acrobatics; twin sisters Mei and Jun play hacker and gamer chick respectively; Kenny's the token meat head, and Sven is a hardcore Norseman who wields his hockey stick like a battleaxe. Bear in mind, OtA owns its slasher roots. One minute Corey's more concerned with his car than the dead half eaten naked chick in the latrine, and the next Mei is in dire agony over the death of a loved one... In reality ANY normal person would be either shitting themselves or long gone in such a circumstance so, I'm 100% cool suspending disbelief in the name of entertainment. Better a survival-horror drama dog with cheese than another rotten zombie burger. **Dave Halverson**



parting shot

[redacted]

review

System: PSP **Developer:** Rockstar Leeds / Rockstar North **Publisher:** Rockstar Games **Avail:** Oct 20

Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars

Even Grand-er

If the modest sales figures can be believed, most gamers missed out on the year s best hand-held experience to date, Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars. But now the former DS exclusive has landed on the PSP, and it s even better than the original. So while I m tempted to scold anyone who initially passed on this juicy palm-sized chapter in the good-to-be-a-gangsta series, I ll simply politely ask they go play it on Sony s portable...right now!

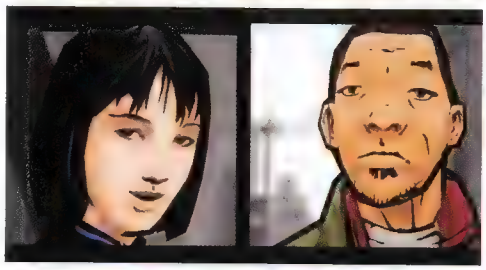
But before diving— guns first—into an experience I actually enjoyed more than the last console GTA, allow me to catch-up the uninitiated. Chinatown Wars is not a stripped down portable entry, but a full-on ass-cappin , car-jacking, cop-evading console rivaling romp that forgoes much of the superfluous activities of GTAIV (no need to take your buddies on a bowling date, here) in favor of an expertly focused experience brimming with gameplay variety.

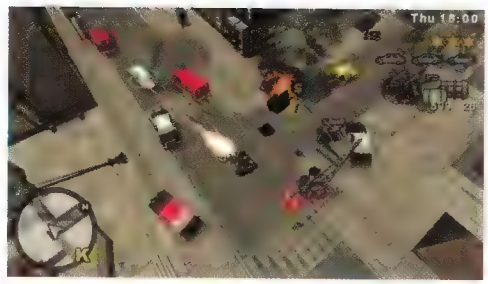
"...the title's allowed to blow up like a flame-engulfed gas station."

Fun-as-hell missions, a genius drug trafficking-driven economy, a richly modeled 3D Liberty City complete with changing weather conditions and a full day/night cycle made Chinatown Wars an absolute marvel on the modestly-powered DS. But with the extra tech behind the PSP not to mention that big beautiful screen the title s allowed to blow up like a flame-engulfed gas station.

This version boasts more missions, remastered audio, and dynamic real-time lighting and self-shadowing effects that translate into screen-swallowing explosions and other visual trickery the DS couldn t quite pull off. The only thing missing is stylus controls; that means we re treated to the same addictive mini-games, only without the hand cramps. Wrap it all in a twisted GTA tale, complete with crazy-ass characters, and you ve got the new best hand-held title of the year. **Matt Cabral**

parting shot





review

System: NDS **Developer:** Media.Vision **Publisher:** XSEED Games **Avail:** Now

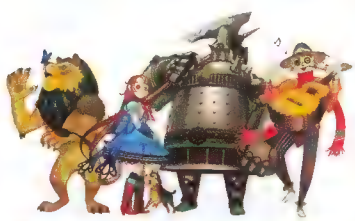
Wizard of Oz
Beyond the Yellow Brick Road

Up next - Gone with the Wind: The Fighting Game

Wizard of Oz feels like a project I might have played back on the Dreamcast, where quirky design, interesting ideas, and absolutely no connection to any big-name series or franchise was the norm for many games.

Oz certainly is quirky. Its control scheme a virtual rollerball on the touch screen that you flick around to direct Dorothy–seems positively bizarre at first, yet works well in practice. Fighting RPG battles with the main Wizard of Oz cast in itself is also a little weird, but the ratio system (which governs who can attack and how often each turn) keeps those battles feeling fresh and fun. As for the game s main activity dungeon crawling exploration fluctuates between thrilling and tedious due to bouts of poor dungeon layout. Yes, it's a flaw, but a flaw I forgave the game for due to how deep I found myself sucked into the world that Oz invited me to.

A world you simply must see to believe, by the way. The dungeons may sometimes feel dull, but they never look it: in no uncertain terms, this is easily some of the most stunning 3D that the DS has ever produced. **Eric L. Patterson**



parting shot

review

System: NDS **Dev:** Gust **Pub** NIS America **Avail:** October 27

Atelier Annie
Alchemists of Sera Island

If only real alchemy could create dresses and cakes

The Atelier series is one that I ve always wanted to be a fan of, and what grabbed me about Atelier Annie over the other titles that I ve played from the franchise is the emphasis here being less on slaying monsters and more on using your alchemy to help re-develop the game s backdrop of Sera Island. By crafting items to win prize money as part of a three-year contest, you can build a variety of shops and attractions that then will grow in popularity (and revenue) depending on how much effort you put into them. This objective improving the world instead of fighting your way through it–is something I really appreciate and wish would be used more often.

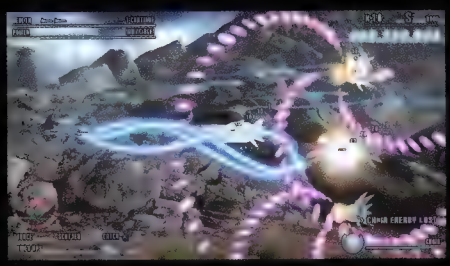
My disappointment with Atelier Annie, then, is that Gust didn t run with this idea more than they did. Managing your different shops could have been more involving (let me make stock for the shops to sell!), and once you get to the point where you begin to skip through the game s massive amounts of character dialog and trust me, you will Annie s adventure is sadly over far too quickly. **Eric L. Patterson**

parting shot

Söldner-X 2 Final Prototype

Conquering Gota IV exclusively on PS3

words [redacted]



My first words to Marcus Pukropski, the CEO of SideQuest Studios, developers of the Söldner-X series, included a hearty congratulations. You don't see many niche, classic-style, German-origin 2D shooters getting the greenlight for sequels. The team's original Söldner-X: Himmelsstürmer will officially yield to Söldner-X 2: Final Prototype in early 2010, and only on PS3. Was the first game a hit on console, or were there other reasons for choosing PS3 exclusivity, I wondered? "Söldner-X for PS3 did sell especially well in the US and Europe, to a wider audience," Marcus contends. "But it wasn't the only reason for a PS3 exclusive. With different configurations and system requirements, it's always more challenging to develop for PC, so we decided to bring Söldner -X 2 directly to PS3."

Let's be honest, fellow players of the first Söldner-X: the folks at Treasure, Taito and Cave had nothing to fear from this new kid on the block, besides a barrage of homage that shouldn't be deflected. Yet SideQuest Studios demonstrated a good feel for classic side-scrolling 2D shooter construction, and combined with crisp 16:9 high-def visuals, 60 FPS, a cool soundtrack and an irresistible $10 price tag, it was like the big bag of candy you buy for Halloween: an enticing sugar rush that, against a figment of your better judgment, is too easy to dip into again and again, punishing effects be damned.

"Before we started on Söldner-X 2, we did a lot of research about what people enjoyed and what should be improved, " Marcus explains. "One major point of criticism was the difficulty level in Söldner-X. There are gamers who loved the challenge to repeatedly try and become better, while others were not used to this kind of challenge. So with Söldner-X 2 we're taking a completely new approach, a system that makes the game more accessible to all kinds of players, yet more rewarding to those who play for a higher score."

And thus dynamic, score-linked difficulty scaling is born. Marcus describes the new system: "There are different factors in the game that analyze the player's performance, including how fast certain enemies are shot down and how often the player got hit. The dynamic difficulty level will always be visible as 'Play Rank' in the HUD and is directly linked to a score multiplier. You start at the lowest rank with a single score multiplier and if your rank increases, the score multiplier will go up as well. Finally, depending on the play rank, the difficulty will change. If your rank goes up, you will encounter more enemies and more bullets. In contrast, if your rank decreases, there will be less challenges and more room for error."

Soldner-X 2 is designed to be beatable without endless attempts. You can restart the game from any of the seven worlds previously reached, and a full play through won't be too difficult. Since Play Rank doesn't reset between stages, a veteran shooter player can theoretically sustain a higher challenge throughout the game, with one's true performance reflected in high scores and trophies. More sweeping sequel alterations: two selectable player ships this time, each varying slightly in hitpoint range and weapon types; as in the original, two main weapons (now with unlimited, non-decreasing energy), but there's only a third slot for additional weapon extras; finally, the all-new limit breaks, triggered after maxing-out a weapon's power gauge. "The chaining system is also completely overhauled, mainly to make the chaining process a bit more straightforward and less interacting," the CEO comments.

The move to PS3 exclusivity has inspired new technology, as you may have observed in these work-in-progress screens. Marcus digs in: "We definitely have more room to use the console's power. The background technique has been completely altered to a 3D system, and all bitmaps, like enemies and bosses, have much more detail. [We] take full advantage of the PS3's video RAM now, allowing us to go for a complex 3D background system and a lot more animations for all enemies. All in all, we think it's a great step forward in terms of visual appeal."

Despite all these upgrades, Marcus confirms Söldner-X 2 will remain locked at 60 FPS from start to finish. I required one more detail to draw me into this sequel: is Rafael Dyll back for sound design? "Yes! Rafael Dyll is once again responsible for the soundtrack, and you can expect a lot more fine tunes from him—more than 25 new tracks in the game."

I'm in. Söldner-X 2: Final Prototype could be the perfect low cost post-holiday download. play

The background has been completely altered to a 3D system.

Marcus Pukropski, CEO, SideQuest Studios.

review Dungeon Fighter Online

System: PC Developer: Neople Publisher: Nexon America Multi: 3p co-op, PvP Available: October

Dungeon Fighter Online

Classic form meets tempting persistence

words Mike Griffin

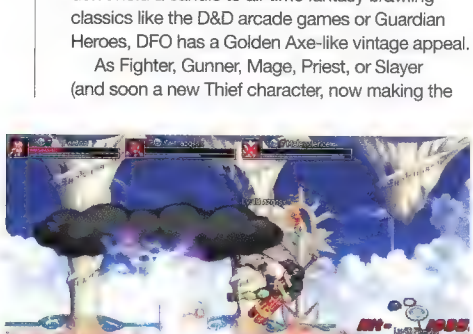
Within minutes of entering Nexon s Dungeon Fighter Online, I was pleasantly surprised to see that the game recognized my Sega Saturn USB controller (you *have* Ebay d one of these, right? It s SF IV joy), so I instantly re-mapped my action controls to that perfect d-pad and 8-button array. DFO s design was heavily influenced by Capcom's beloved CPS-1/2 arcade classics, namely the fantasy-themed beat em ups like Knights of the Round and Dungeons & Dragons: Shadow Over Mystara games best played with fine 8-way joysticks and superior control pads. Take that classic form of gameplay and integrate modern MMORPG systems and character advancement, and you have DFO.

On paper that reads like a potent cocktail, and in practice DFO largely delivers on the hybrid promise. The game's 2D visuals are intentionally retro 16-bit grade, closer to Sega Genesis quality than CPS-2 arcade in terms of animation and color palettes. While character sprites and backgrounds don t hold a candle to all-time fantasy brawling classics like the D&D arcade games or Guardian Heroes, DFO has a Golden Axe-like vintage appeal.

As Fighter, Gunner, Mage, Priest, or Slayer (and soon a new Thief character, now making the rounds in the Korean and Japanese versions), this online fighter has you completing quests with up to three players in field and dungeon stages. The narrative backbone for DFO is pure fantasy fluff, and many quests are essentially gameplay Achievements, like "Clear Mirkwood without getting hit more than 10 times." You pick up these quests in large town hubs, where you can chat with other players, craft items, and train up skills.

That s really the best part of DFO: a free-to-play 2D beat 'em up with good netcode and this huge repertoire of upgradable RPG stats and skills for the characters (with four class promotion possibilities each). Often these abilities are like extra twitch fighting moves, complimenting combos, chains, juggles, grapples, throws, and specials. I kept thinking of other venerable beat em ups, and how they might turn out if merged with MMORPG systems. Imagine leveling up Mike Haggar online by running missions across Metro City, outfitting him with new clothes and extra wrestling moves at side alley shops and trainers? This is the draw; chasing the MMO upgrade carrots, knowing that your persistent 2D fighter avatar will instantly benefit in an action context.

You've seen prettier 2D brawlers on Genesis, SNES, Neo Geo and many arcade games of that era, where DFO s retro inspiratiotn is based, but nostalgic fans of the genre won t find too much fault in the game's presentation. The control is pretty tight (a suitable controller is a must), and fighting fans will appreciate the end-of-stage performance ratings, where not getting hit and good technique, not merely surviving, is rewarded. play



A good joystick is a must for DFO.

parting shot

...abilities are like extra twitch fighting moves, complimenting combos...

System: PC, Mac **Developer:** Amanita Design **Publisher:** Amanita Design **Multi:** SP only **Available:** October

Machinarium

Lost love, diagrams and vindication

words Mike Griffin

...lovingly hand-sketched background elements integrate textured real-life photos.

Generally speaking, it's in the best interest of gaming editor-type people to not reveal any major coverage weaknesses to their readers, lest they begin to diminish their own credibility. I prefer full disclosure: Truth is, I rarely lay a finger on point and click adventure games, nor play them to completion. It takes a small miracle to fully engage me in this genre, as the core mechanics of point and click adventuring typically renders me numb. I may have turned a corner. Amanita Design's delightful Machinarium is a small miracle that has me fully engaged.

Available for PC and Mac from mid-October onward, Machinarium is the latest in a series of painstakingly assembled Flash adventure games from Czech indie firm Amanita Design. The images on this page are actual in-game illustrations, meticulously painted and animated by graphic artist Adolf Lachman and a small crew of talented contributors, carrying the teachings and style of East European animation schools. Amanita's development environment is raw and tangible: it consists of pencil, paper, PC, tablet, digital camera, Photoshop and Flash. Those lovingly hand-sketched background elements integrate textured real-life photos, lending the robot world a gritty, painterly beauty.

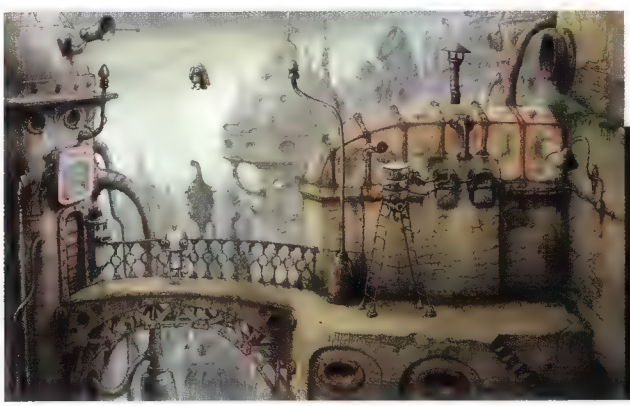
The Machinarium is a charming robotic society, steeped in personality and mechanized melancholy. Self-aware machines share their problems with Josef, the main character (named after Josef Capek, a famous Czech painter and inventor of the word "robot"), along lovely cobblestoned plazas, shadowed by oppressive mountains of junk in the background, and flanked by veins of industry and automation. Our would-be hero was kicked out of the city, and we join him as he begins his journey back through the metal jungle. He's trying to find his girl, who we see in sporadic, reminiscing thought bubbles containing short memories of the couple's quirky dates together. On his way up from the city's underbelly, he escapes his longtime adversaries, the bullies of the Black Cap Brotherhood, but witnesses their terrible plan to blow the city's capital building sky high. Josef's quest to prevent this begins.

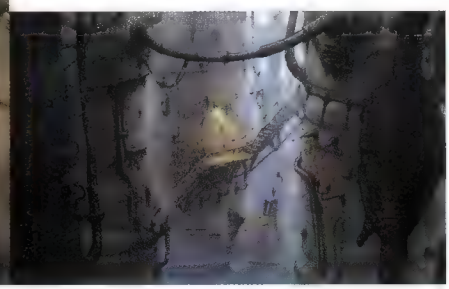
I love interacting with all the neat little devices that form the puzzles of Machinarium, each one a small treat of intellect and animation. You'll encounter many logical puzzles, re-arranging buttons, switches and levers to form patterns of activation. You'll collect bits and parts in a small inventory, often combining seemingly disparate objects together to placate or distract the robot citizens, activating fiendishly clever solutions. Josef can also flex his main body to grow taller or retract down to floor level, and his arms can stretch out a dozen feet. These contortions are often exploited in surprising puzzle scenarios.

As I alluded to earlier, I'm not exactly a point and click adventuring pro, so I had to consult the game's "?" help hint (another clever thought bubble animation) a few times. You can take it a step further and request a full puzzle solution, but it's inside a locked journal. To unlock it, the game pops up a tiny monochrome-screened side-scrolling shooter where you navigate a key through a brief stage while shooting (pew pew!) robot spiders. This conjured up memories of the simple mini-games you could transfer to the Dreamcast's VMU memory card. After you get your key vessel to the key hole, the journal unlocks to reveal an absolutely stunning sketched diagram detailing the entire puzzle. That's pure game designer love right there: a tip of the hat to project lead Jakub Dvorský.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention Machinarium's wonderful soundtrack by Tomas "Floex" Dvorak (visit his e-mental.com site for samples). He also wrote the tunes for Amanita's earlier hits, Samorost I and II, but Machinarium is without question some of his finest work—as always, in rich, abstracted, wistful electronic style. play

Point-and-click adventure never looked so good.





parting shot

System: PC **Developer:** Futuremark Game Studios **Publisher:** Futuremark **Multi:** Online teams **Available:** December

Shattered Horizon

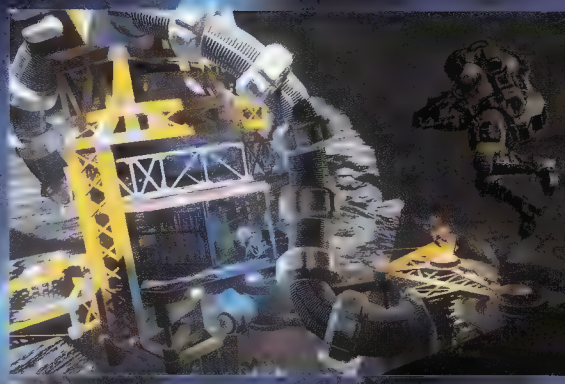
Defying gravity

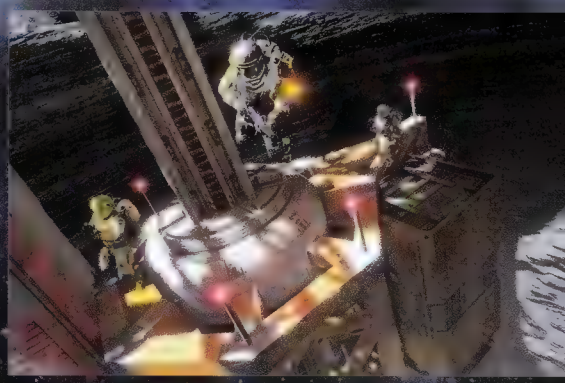
words Mike Griffin

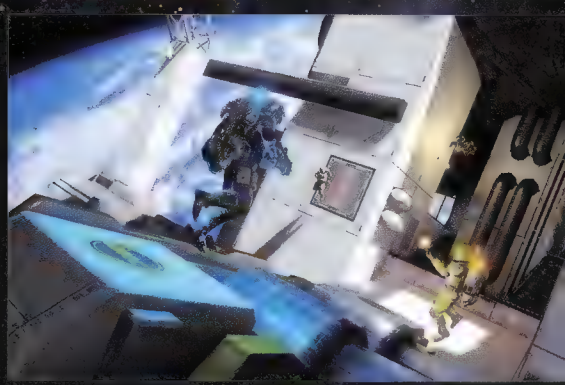
Wow, they actually pulled it off. Since our first big preview of Shattered Horizon earlier this year, I've had a chance to play SH extensively in Futuremark's internal closed beta. The lofty goal of representing FPS combat in realistic zero gravity environments has been achieved.

Forty years from now a terrible accident destroys most of the moon, resulting in a huge Saturn-like ring of debris around the Earth—hence the Shattered Horizon. This is the playground for a low-cost multiplayer shooter, pitting the renegade Moon Mining Cooperative forces against surviving members of the International Space Agency security team from the damaged International Space Station. Equipped with highly maneuverable, combat-ready, and reasonably vulnerable spacesuits, a single multi-purpose weapon, and various utility grenades, the MMC and ISA forces clash on stunning orbital platforms in 32-player tactical combat.

...the feel of boost-propelled combat in weightlessness—like Tribes in space.







One giant leap for FPS design...

Stunning, yes, and extremely power hungry. This is Futuremark's first venture into game development, but the company has a long and celebrated history of incredible-looking benchmark apps in the 3DMark suites. With a muscular modern rig, the proprietary DX10 engine on display in Shattered Horizon is gorgeous. Futuremark uses a special high blend surface lighting technique to create striking contrasts between the bright, unfiltered sun, and cold, dark shadows, with structures and meteoroids coated in deep shader depth, and excellent high-res 3D sky boxes of space and Earth all around.

The ISS map, in particular, is just ridiculous with the game's maximum quality settings engaged: hammered by an asteroid and nearly cut in two, the station and surrounding debris field constitutes Shattered Horizon's most wide open level, dominated by a spectacular full length view of the glimmering ISS. The Moondust map is a mining facility that's been re-opened by the MMC at the behest of its greedy mega-corp backers on Earth. Here you'll be navigating a lot of interiors like caves and corridors, and the fire fights are usually close-quarters and over quickly. The ruins of the Hadley space station, a waypoint platform, are scattered across the Flipside map. Here the ISA and MMC forces fight for stockpiles of high-grade nuclear fuel. There's enough to sustain a facility for years, so the ISA needs to ensure this supply doesn't get into MMC hands.

Thankfully the immersion into these bleak, beautiful environments is enhanced, not diminished, by the Zero-G gameplay. Futuremark is still refining the way spacesuits (with magnetic boots) lock and walk across surfaces, and the camera behavior this entails, but they've totally captured the feel of boost-propelled combat in weightlessness—like Tribes in space, minus the need to ever land. I would venture to say that if the typical FPS game makes you woozy or nauseous, Shattered Horizon's fast-paced, 360-degree navigation will probably have you blowing moon chunks.

Shattered Horizon will likely arrive at $20 or less, with a small handful of maps. If recent hits like Killing Floor and Battlefield 1943 are any indication, multiplayer FPS fans are pleased with this content to price ratio. Will SH graduate to full campaign status in a sequel? It's been mentioned, but not convincingly. I'd love to see a franchise built on this foundation and technology..

System: PC **Developer:** Runic Games **Publisher:** Runic Games/Perfect World **Multi:** SP **Available:** October

Torchlight

Light it up

words Mike Griffin

The Alchemist focuses elemental energy through steampunk devices.

Torchlight will launch just days after as you read these words, as the classic-style action RPG from the creators of Diablo and Fate lands just in time for the holidays. This is the single-player spark for Runic Games' Torchlight (the separate MMO arrives late 2010), a vastly replayable, loot-filled dungeon crawler. I asked Runic Games' co-founders, Max Schaefer and Travis Baldree, for their final, ultimate Torchlight pitch, which we've delivered in the form of a top 10. play

The Top 10 Reasons to Play Torchlight

10. Travis: "We have transformable pets who accompany you throughout the game, haul, and even sell your loot for you."
Mike: Where can I get one of these? I'm usually the one cleaning up after my pet, and it's definitely not loot! But seriously, I think everyone loves collectible and upgradable pets. And this is a lot more convenient than taking a portal to town every fifteen minutes to sell!
9. Max: "Our team is made up of the folks behind Diablo, Diablo II, Fate, and Mythos."
Mike: In other words, Runic is hyper-specialized in this genre and intimately familiar with what makes action RPG players tick.
8. Max: "The music is brought to you by Matt Uelmen: it's gorgeous, atmospheric, more than 40 minutes of original score."
Mike: Matt can be trusted to score an action RPG with style after his award-winning work at Blizzard on the Diablo I & II, StarCraft, and Burning Crusade soundtracks.
7. Travis: "It will be released October 27."
Mike: It's another very busy holiday line-up this year. Fortunately for you, there's nothing quite like Torchlight.
6. Travis: "Three classes with their own awesome skills and unique skill trees."
Mike: I've fallen for the Vanquisher; can't resist dual-wielding her pistols. The Alchemist has some serious steampunk magic. I usually don't play tank characters, but the Destroyer is a wrecking ball and his spirit summons are cool.
5. Max: "We respect your time. You can save the game *anywhere*."
Mike: I suppose we'll have to take a break at some point...
4. Max: "It comes with the full editing suite we used to build the game: you can change everything from art, to quests, classes, skills, levels, and UI."
Mike: And fast! You can produce a good little homebrew dungeon in no time. Then you fill the mod with insanely hard monsters to torture your friends.
3. Travis: "It's twenty bucks! Seriously! That's cheaper than two movie tickets!"
Mike: It's awesome how much raw *game* you can get for twenty bucks today. Good times.
2. Max: "Randomized dungeons and monsters! Over 30-some main levels that support the story quest, and a limitless dungeon in town for gaining Fame and finding rare and unique loot."
Mike: The satchel-loads of loot will be glorious. I like the idea that you can work on raising your local Fame in the random dungeons while treasure hunting, then take advantage of Fame perks as you head back into quest levels.
1. Travis: "Torchlight is fast, fun, action-RPG gameplay. It's hack and slash and dungeon crawling at its finest!"
Mike: With Runic's history, you have the fast and fun part well in hand: a real instinct for the feel of the action, the design of loot systems and character advancement. Vibrant stylized backgrounds and enemies will make the crawl memorable, and it seems like Torchlight runs great on just about any PC. Finally, the price tag is perfect for gamers who are going broke after the full-priced holiday pulp.

Our thanks to Max Schaefer and Travis Baldree of Runic Games for participating in this last minute lightning round. Torchlight is burning bright.

Ankama's DOFUS reboots in 2.0

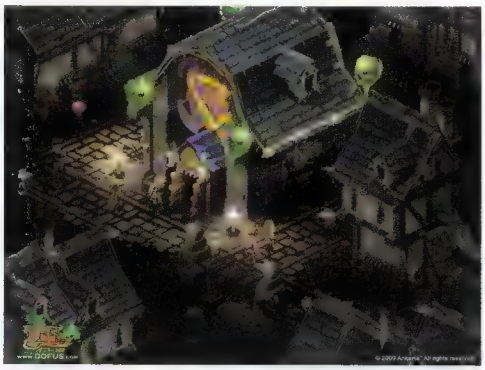
If you were asked to list the world's top five biggest massively multiplayer game communities, would Dofus come to mind? The Flash-based MMO phenomenon has gathered a huge following since 2004, boasting 20 million players globally. It's been released for PC, Mac, and Linux, and localized in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and Italian (with a Japanese launch scheduled for 2010). Developed and published by France-based Ankama, a major European player in games and animation, Dofus is celebrating its 5th anniversary in style: the December release of Dofus 2.0, featuring a comprehensive facelift.

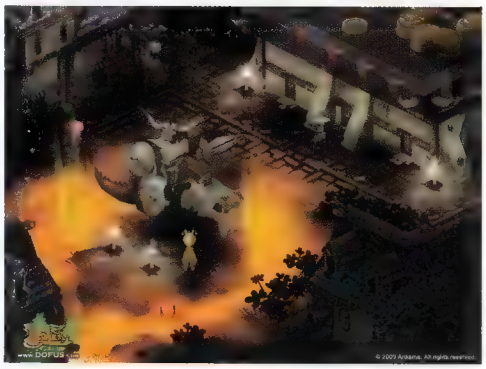
Why is Dofus so popular? Besides a minimal configuration set-up process, players love the manga-inspired graphics that fill the game and all of its ancillary parts. Ankama's character artists are fantastic, establishing a style that's instantly recognizable. Dofus 2.0 features completely redrawn graphics and revised source code, now more in line with Ankama's second strategic MMORPG, Wakfu, in terms of 2D complexity and background definition. Over 10,000 game maps have been refurbished; characters are also larger and more detailed, with some 2,000 enhanced animations.

Beneath the rich 2D graphics and often whimsical lore and legends, Dofus can attribute much of its enduring success to excellent RPG systems. The tactical combat, played out on a private chunk of the map complete with movement squares and other strategic RPG goodness, is fairly unique in the genre. The twelve playable classes (each representing the themes and powers of twelve gods) have hundreds of spells tailor-made for this tactical, turn-based combat, and character customization runs deep, with tons of equipment choices and specialization trees to pursue across 200 levels. Dofus, like Wakfu, also celebrates an entirely player-driven economy, with over twenty professions to master in the wild—like fishing and exotic flora collection, and a merchant system to move those goods. A good harvester might exchange valuable herbs for a top fisherman's catch of the day, and then feed it to his hungry Bow Meow pet.

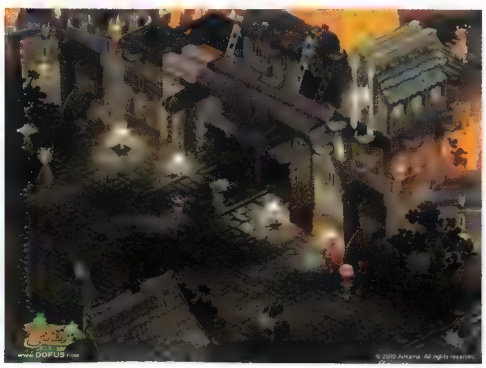
Or you can save rare seeds for your own garden, as Dofus allows players to buy property for cabins, houses, and larger guild headquarters. The guild system is tremendously popular in Dofus, spawning a whole subculture of war room captains, guilds honing their tactical 1 vs.1 and 2 vs. 2 PvP strategies like athletes training for a big game. This element of Dofus became so popular it spawned inter-server tournaments and eventually a stand-alone Dofus Arena game with its own global league.

We'll be entering the Dofus 2.0 beta very soon for some substantial gameplay in Ankama's renewed and remodeled hit, ahead of its December launch. play





Dofus can attribute much of its enduring success to excellent RPG systems.



Islands of Wakfu

Ankama is preparing its first foray into console territory: Islands of Wakfu for Xbox Live Arcade, a 2-player beat 'em up adventure that introduces a doomsday scenario to the Wakfu/Dofus universe, complete with three different endings.

RightStuf.com asks...

"What kind of OTAKU are you?"

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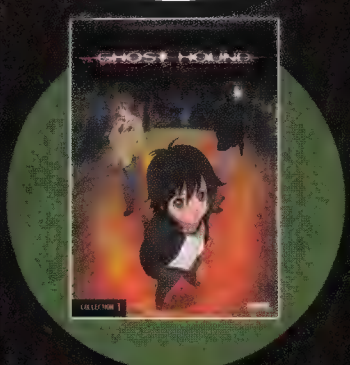
HORROR Otaku

Likes: The unknown (& the undead).
Blood and guts. Things that go bump in the night.



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* Prepare for the zombie onslaught!

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Released by: Dark Horse **Volume:** 2 **Rating:** 16+ **Available:** September 23, 2009

Neon Genesis Evangelion: The Shinji Ikari Raising Project

School Days

Yes, the beloved Evangelion story continues. This new manga series Neon Genesis Evangelion: The Shinji Ikari Raising Project takes place in the alternate world shown in the anime. And while its main audience will probably consist of old fans, newbies can still read this manga and enjoy it, though they won t understand every detail. Nevertheless, this second volume is a fun and often humorous read. Shinji, Asuka and Ayanami are all in middle school when Kaworu Nagisa transfers in after being given an ultra-important mission. This sounds serious, but once he s in the classroom it s more about the girls being suspicious that Shinji and Kaworu are spending too much time together, and that must mean they re boyfriends. The manga continues on with several short stories, including a school field trip where Shinji (who actually isn t boyfriends with Kaworu – sorry, fangirls) finds himself infatuated with Ayanami. There s a bonus Misato s Fan Service Center in the end, plus a few pages of color in the beginning. The manga also makes sure we know FUNimation is releasing the film Evangelion: 1.0 You Are (Not) Alone. Oh, yes, the story continues! **Danica Davidson**

Read It: If you re an Evangelion fan or someone curious about the Evangelion world.

Yes, the beloved Evangelion story continues.

Released by: CMX **Volume:** 1 **Rating:** Everyone **Available:** September 8, 2009

A Tale of an Unknown Country

Innocent Love

Maid outfits in manga don't always have to be fetishistic. In A Tale of an Unknown Country, they re just an innocent part of the plot. Rosemarie is a princess of a poor nation who s being arranged to marry Prince Reynol. Well, she s not about to let people tell her what to do! She disguises herself as a maid to work in Reynol s kingdom and get to know him. That way if she likes him, she can stay with him, and if she doesn t, she can find a way to break the engagement. Rather than a story about getting away from a horrible arranged marriage, Rosemarie ends up liking the prince . . . only for other people to then try to break the two of them up. A Tale of an Unknown Country gets an Everyone rating, so there s only light romance in here, and everyone from elementary school to old age can read and enjoy it. There s an additional short story at the end called Voice Magic about a boy who falls in love with a girl after hearing her voice. **Danica Davidson**

Read It: If you re in the mood for a light love story.

Maid outfits in manga don't always have to be fetishistic.

Released by: TokyoPop **Written by:** Ken Faggio **Illustrated by:** Fernando Furikawa **Vol:** 1 **Rating:** 16+ **Avail:** Now

Tantric Stripfighter Trina

Death by Exposure

Can a single unarmed non-super powered woman take down an entire room of outlaws and hardened criminals? When she s as pissed off and smoking hot as Trina Devi; you bet yer ass. You see, Trina s homeworld, Rama a peaceful utopia dedicated to the Martial prowess of the Shaolin Monks and the unsurpassable sexual union of the first real tantric adepts—was completely decimated, and everyone she held dear murdered before her very eyes, and she s not too happy about it. Fortunately for her pending revenge, but very unfortunately for the government-hired mercenaries that did the deed and anyone that crosses her path, Trina is skilled in her native art of stripfighting; a fusion of Shaolin Martial arts and tantric sensuality…a most effective and pleasurable to watch fighting style, I must say.

Together with her newly acquainted cyber-sidekick Chrome Abbey, and her robot assistant Bonds, Trina s out for a little payback by way of dispensing a lot of pain, and she likes to let it all hang out.

Stripfighter Trina may appear to be one big gaggle of fan service but, while it s oh so easy on the eyes illustrator Fernando Furikawa does one helluva job it s also a great take on the typical quest narrative…Sort of an old west meets sci-fi vibe with an Indiana Jones/martial arts flavor. Sure goes down easy. **Dave Halverson**

Read It: Or forever ponder what thy missed. Does this cover not beckon thee?

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Nabari no Ou

The Complete Series Part 1

Steamin' inner demons

words Dave Halverson

Anime is weird, and getting weirder every day, and I love it for it. Consider the plight of Rokujou Miharu—an "ordinary" junior high student, if you consider being a complete tool "ordinary"—going about his business of ignoring the world around him and everyone in it. Ah, you see, but we know why Miharu is such a mess, because we saw him at the outset in a flashback in the arms of an unknown hero facing off against a legion of ninja who for some reason want to tear him apart…

As fate would have it, we happen to join Miharu's life in progress just as he discovers what's been gurgling around in his inner self all these years; none other than the "Shinra Bansho;" a power so omnipotent that it grants its host god like power, if, and this is a big if, they can harness it. Call upon it in haste and well…anyone remember "Scanners?" It's been known to explode a few heads. It's sort of like the Witchblade only without the sexy transformation and super hero superfluous. Rather, the opposing forces are the various ninja clans who have seamlessly blended into the fabric of modern life, playing out their private little soap opera right under our noses. All of whom want the power. Once the secret gets out that Miharu's the one—when the power does come out to play Miharu becomes covered in vertical scrolling Matrix code before it takes its final form as, well, take a guess—ninja come out of the woodwork, some as allies and others as mortal enemies. Even those closest to him, sworn to protect him with their lives seem to have ulterior motives. So what's a kid to do whose life is turned upside down by the Book of Knowledge (hijutsu) dwelling inside of him? Well, not a whole lot, at first. It's Miharu's apathy that has taken him this far, but as the tensions around him mount he finds the unlikeliest of allies and by the time he finally does choose a side the lines are so blurred it almost doesn't matter because nothing, so far, is

is what it seems. Nabari has a little bit of everything going for it; action, drama, tension, mystery, and comedy. And what it doesn't have, which is mainly fan service, it doesn't need. The complete series volume 1 certainly kept me glued.

It's really too bad that anime has become such a fiasco of late. Used to be you'd read about a show and then follow it either episode by episode, volume by volume or wait for the box to come out. FUNimation is doing it right by releasing entire seasons at a time, but the online component really crashes the whole party. Curious what I'd find on Nabari, I found subbed episodes on FUNimation's site, starting at like, episode 19 and elsewhere the odd fan sub in the

Nabari has a little bit of everything going for it; action, drama, tension, mystery, and comedy.

episode 20 and up range. As if trying to figure out what the heck s going on isn t insult enough, watching on a PC screen ads fatal injury.

I feel sorry for the writer, Yuhki Kamatani Nabari no Ou was her manga debut all of the animators at J.C. Staff, and FUNimation who ve had to compromise due to the rampant piracy that now plagues America s entertainment industry. I always considered Otaku a respectful term; someone who cared about the creators and the publishers who make it all possible for those of us that play by the rules and feel good about paying these people for their hard work. But since they ve toppled the industry and seem to care less, it almost seems like an insult. I despise the unregulated nature of the internet with every fiber of my being. It's slowly but surely destroying *everything* and everyone it touches. If you re so inclined, pick up Nabari at a store, and definitely check it out while you still can. play

parting shot

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FUNIMATION ENTERTAINMENT

 Released by: FUNimation **Rating:** TV-14 **Running Time:** 320 **Available:** Now

FULL METAL PANIC THE SECOND RAID

The "Other" Full Metal Anime

words Bill Gray

What is it with anime and the term full metal ? It s odd that such an unusual term would be used for two of the best action anime to blast down the pike in recent memory: *Fullmetal Alchemist* and, prior to that, *Full Metal Panic!* With the release of the second season s box set, Full Metal Panic: The Second Raid, you can now judge for yourself which full metal you like best.

To catch you up: Sousuke s a member of a secret, independent, international peacekeeping force known as MITHRIL. Ironically, MITHRIL keeps the peace through precise military strikes designed to destabilize bad countries, as well as responding to other terrorist-type threats. MITHRIL also has the responsibility for protecting the Whispered, a select group of individuals that, for some yet-unknown reason, can understand highly advanced technology, and even build it in some cases. Chidori Kaname, loud-mouth high school student extraordinaire, is one of the Whispered, and MITHRIL sends its best officer, socially-challenged military master Sousuke, to pose as a high school student while discreetly protecting her.

After coming to Kaname's rescue at the end of the first season, you d think Kaname would cut Sousuke a little slack. But no, she s still giving him as hard a time as ever as The Second Raid opens. And for his part, Sousuke s the same as well, still guarding Kaname and trying to pass math tests while saving the world and maintaining international peace in his spare time. But thankfully, *TSR* sees some development in Kaname and Sousuke s relationship, which adds a good amount of depth to what s already a wonderfully exciting series. These dramatic elements complement the intense, well-paced and animated military action, rounding the show out and making *The Second Raid* even better than the first series. play

parting shot

Released by: Dark Horse **Author:** Kenichi Sonoda **Vol:** 4 **Rating:** 17+ **Available:** Now

Gunsmith Cats - Burst

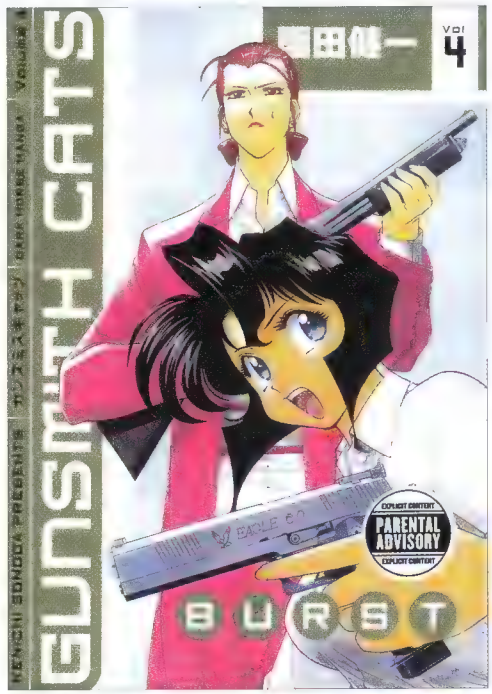
Here kitty kitty

Gunsmith Cats has never received the attention it deserves. Where s the manga-to-anime follow up? Sure, we had Riding Bean waaaaay back in the 90s, and a few of OVAs, but a 24-episode series on the exploits of Chicago bounty hunter, gun aficionado, and gearhead extraordinaire Rally Vincent would be anime dynamite, not to mention her colorful partners in crime. Until then, I ll have to content myself with the high-production value Dark Horse manga titles, which are now up to volume 4 in the Burst sequence.

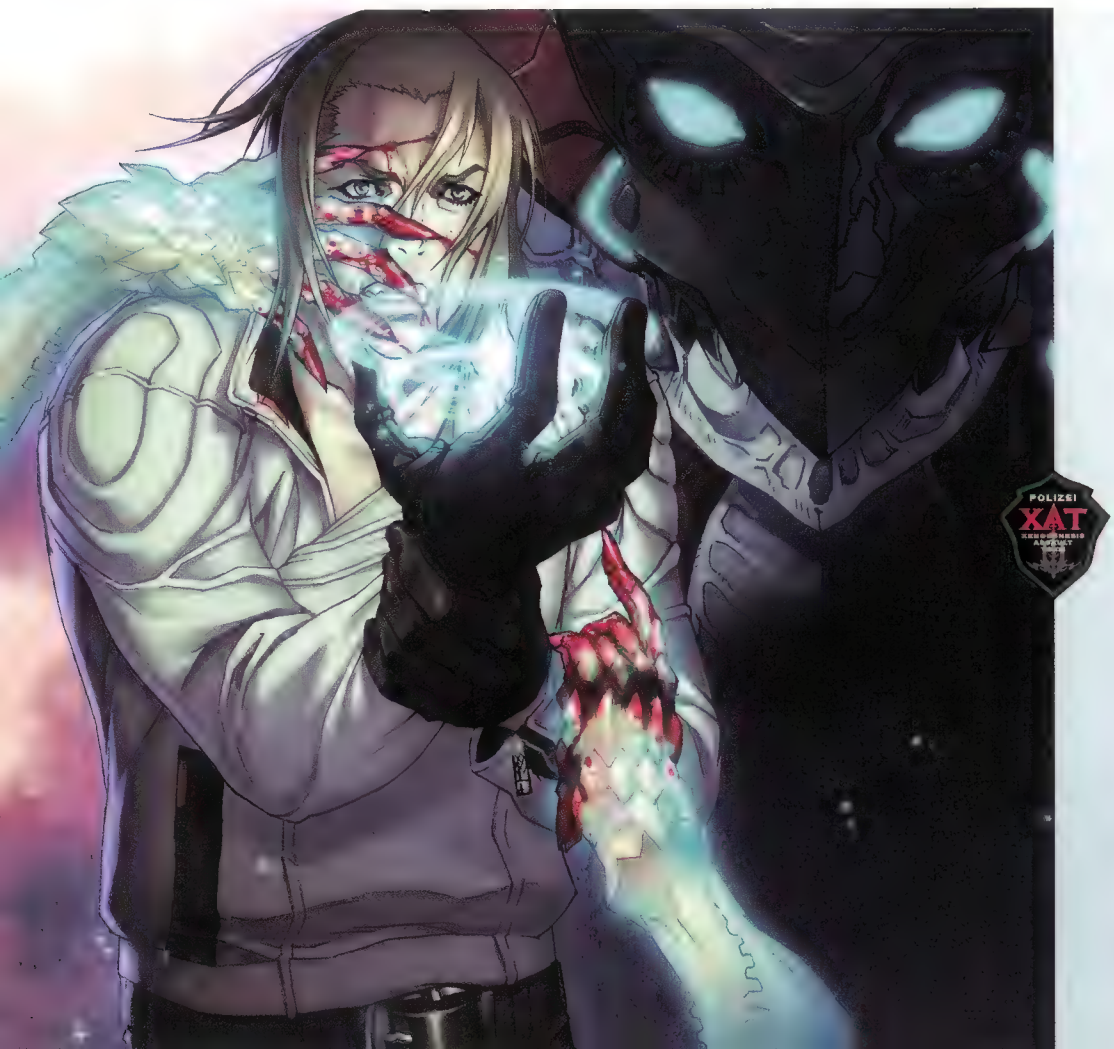
The book opens with Rally and co. enjoying the payday they collected after their underground road racing adventure with Bean Bandit and Percy in the prior volume. Their celebration is short-lived, however, as an attempt by Rally to collect a chance bounty results in her capture by an old nemesis, who Rally shot in the face in the first story arc—Goldie Musou. Even though Goldie didn t die from the shot to the head, she lost much of her memory, including her psycho-sexual obsession with Rally. Unfortunately for Rally, Goldie's gang wants Rally to help restore Goldie's memory, until an assassin crashes the party and everything gets shot to heck.

Though the series stretches the bounds of credulity almost to breaking at times, *Gunsmith Cats* is perhaps the most meticulously researched and drawn manga I ve ever read. You ll learn fascinating tidbits about weaponry, cars, and bounty hunting, all the while being wildly entertained by Rally s exploits. Volume 4, though a bit light on this sort of content, is more of a transition into a new arc in Rally s saga, and certainly maintains the breakneck pacing of the rest of the series. **Bill Gray**

Read It: If you enjoyed *Black Lagoon* and *Cowboy Bebop*, or if you re curious about how to take down a man in full-body armor or both.



Rally and Goldy, together again.



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Released by: Dark Horse **Volume:** 2 **Rating:** 16+ **Available:** September 23, 2009

Neon Genesis Evangelion: The Shinji Ikari Raising Project

School Days

Yes, the beloved *Evangelion* story continues. This new manga series *Neon Genesis Evangelion: The Shinji Ikari Raising Project* takes place in the alternate world shown in the anime. And while its main audience will probably consist of old fans, newbies can still read this manga and enjoy it, though they won t understand every detail. Nevertheless, this second volume is a fun and often humorous read. Shinji, Asuka and Ayanami are all in middle school when Kaworu Nagisa transfers in after being given an ultra-important mission. This sounds serious, but once he s in the classroom it s more about the girls being suspicious that Shinji and Kaworu are spending too much time together, and that must mean they re boyfriends. The manga continues on with several short stories, including a school field trip where Shinji (who actually isn t boyfriends with Kaworu—sorry, fangirls) finds himself infatuated with Ayanami. There s a bonus Misato s Fan Service Center at the end, plus a few color pages in the beginning. The manga also makes sure we know FUNimation is releasing the film *Evangelion: 1.0 You Are (Not) Alone*. Oh, yes, the story continues! **Danica Davidson**

Read It: If you re an Evangelion fan or someone curious about the Evangelion world.

Yes, the beloved Evangelion story continues.

Released by: CMX **Volume:** 1 **Rating:** Everyone **Available:** September 8, 2009

A Tale of an Unknown Country

Innocent Love

Maid outfits in manga don't always have to be fetishistic. In *A Tale of an Unknown Country*, they re just an innocent part of the plot. Rosemarie is a princess of a poor nation who s being arranged to marry Prince Reynol. Well, she s not about to let people tell her what to do! She disguises herself as a maid to work in Reynol s kingdom and get to know him. That way if she likes him, she can stay with him, and if she doesn't, she can find a way to break the engagement. Rather than a story about getting away from a horrible arranged marriage, Rosemarie ends up liking the prince... only for other people to then try to break the two of them up. *A Tale of an Unknown Country* gets an Everyone rating, so there s only light romance in here, and everyone from elementary school to old age can read and enjoy it. There s an additional short story at the end called Voice Magic about a boy who falls in love with a girl after hearing her voice. **Danica Davidson**

Read It: If you re in the mood for a light love story...with maid outfits.

Maid outfits in manga don't always have to be fetishistic.

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With Penguin United's ElectroFlow Induction Charger for Nintendo Wii, you'll never need to buy another set of overpriced batteries again. The charger is compatible with or without the Wii Motion Plus adapter, and uses long lasting Li-Ion batteries and induction technology to charge up to 2 Wii remotes at a time for up to 14 hours of continuous gameplay (depending on the game). One of the ElectroFlow's best features isn't its sleek design, charge light indicator or its subtle blue glow, but the fact that there is absolutely no need to remove those cumbersome silicone Wii remote jackets...ever! Simply drop the remote(s) into either one of the two contoured charging bays and you're all set.

Looks like a couple of Wii Remotes melted into a Mac mini

Demon Silicone Series Case (Halloween Collection)

$17.99 www.ideal-case.com

Looking for a way to protect your iPhone *and* give it a little "character?" Well, look no further because the folks over at Ideal-case.com have you, or at least your iPhone, covered. The Demon Silicone Series Case – (Halloween Collection) is made out of pure, 100% silicone, is static resistant, both odor and dust free and glows in the dark! "Ooh, spooky!" If the Halloween Collection isn't your thing, there are plenty of other colors to choose from. Why deprive your iPhone of the fun of dressing up for Halloween. Plus it looks a whole lot cuter than your Darth Vader costume.

Haruhi Suzumiya T-Shirts

$18.95, www.jlist.com

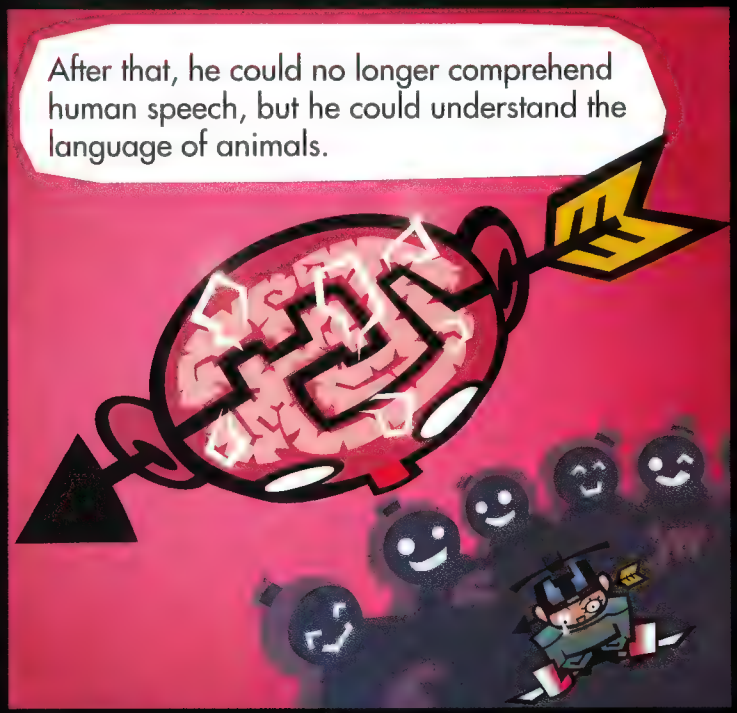
Ever feel like your life is unfolding like a bad dub? Reality got you down? Why not change it, with your very own Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya T-Shirt! Adorned with her famous "I'm not interested in normal humans" catch phrase printed in brightly colored kanji, members of the SOS Brigade, aliens, time travelers and ESPers will see you coming a mile away, so bust out your best Haruhi-dance...and try not to upset the space time continuum.

Ultimate Game Chair Reactor Mini

$69.99 www.ultimategamechair.com

Here's one for the kids. The Reactor Mini Game Chair from Ultimate Game Chair is specifically designed for young-uns from 3-9 years old and comes ready to rock right out of the box-no assembly required!

Proudly displaying everyone's favorite hedgehog and proud Sega mascot, Sonic, the Reactor Mini comes loaded with features sure to enhance your gameplay experience: four vibrating motors that sync up with gameplay, two slammin' 3D stereo speakers integrated into the headrest, an auxiliary audio input jack, plush foam cushioning, and more. All of which easily make this gaming chair well worth its $69.99 price point.



HighRoller used his new power to overthrow the Emperor and amass an invincible army of animals. He lied to these innocent creatures and convinced them that humans are evil. Now his legions of Elephants and Bears, Camels and Rhinos invade the homes and castles of humans, and drive them into the barren wilderness.

Long ago, HighRoller served as the lowly Court Jester to the Emperor. But during a strange hunting accident he was shot through the head with a magic arrow.

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www.Hero108.tv

Cartoon Network series launching in January 2010
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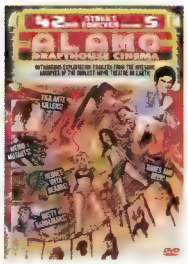
42nd Street Forever: Alamo Drafthouse Cinema

Studio: Synapse Films



The fifth go-round of Synapse's essential collections of 70s and 80s exploitation trailers opens on a hilariously flatulent note—a track-suited Charlton Heston grimaces his way through an explanation of the new ratings system—and from there, plows with abandon through every possible substrata of drive-in and grindhouse cinema. The mix here again careens from kung-fu (Angela Mao Yi whips ass in *Sting of the Dragon Masters*) to grotty softcore (Candice Rialson reveals her secret talent—a singing vagina—in the jaw-dropping *Chatterbox*) and Italian-made gangster and spy action (John Cassavetes in *Machine Gun McCain*; Anthony Eisley smarms his way through the Bond knockoff *Lightning Bolt*). But as with other volumes, the high (or low) water marks are the undefinables, like *Lucky Seven*, a spastic slapstick martial arts pic from Hong Kong with real pre-teens giving—and getting—a good beating from adults, and *The Secret of Magic Island*, a kiddie film with an all-animal cast who, from the looks of it, did not survive the production. All of the spots come from the hallowed vaults of Austin, TX's famed Alamo Drafthouse Cinema, which is feted in both the commentary by two of its programmers and in a rollicking retrospective documentary. **Paul Gaita**

Not Quite Hollywood

Studio: Magnolia Home Entertainment

The wild, wild world of 70s and 80s exploitation from Australia gets its due in this rollicking documentary from director Mark Hartley. Those not versed in grindhouse lore might find most of the titles here hopelessly obscure save for the rare breakout hits like *Mad Max*, but as any treasure hunter will tell you, the joy isn't in finding the big score, but in traversing the odd path—hence the enjoyment in hearing the major players from the period like Barry Humphries (later best known as drag icon Dame Edna Everage), Russell Mulcahy and American imports like Jamie Lee Curtis and Dennis Hopper detail the Wild West atmosphere that dominated the making of such action, horror and sexploitation titles as *Razorback, Alvin Purple* and *Howling III: The Marsupials* (whose director, Philippe Mora, axed Nicole Kidman for failing to convince as a werewolf). Footage from these and other films depict a cinema scene that aimed to retain its Antipodean uniqueness while gunning for American dollars; the result was a truly cracked and inspired period of filmmaking that underscored the gonzo frontier spirit that brought people to Australia in the first place. **Paul Gaita**

Ultraman: The Complete Series

Studio: Mill Creek Entertainment

This seminal tokusatsu series about a human who takes on the superhuman abilities of an alien giant in order to fight a horde of invading monsters has lost none of its na ve charm since debuting on Japanese TV in 1966. The key to its appeal lies in both the simplicity of its story—monsters arrive in Japan and run amok, Science Patrolman Hayata ignites the Beta Capsule and becomes the skyscraping Ultraman, and monster-thrashing havoc ensues—and the outlandishness of producer Eiji Tsuburaya's creations. Tsuburaya, who designed Godzilla and most of Toho's cavalcade of creatures, had a lower budget with *Ultraman*, which resulted in some truly oddball beasts, most notably the lobster-clawed Baltan, and Jirass, which turned out to be a worn-out Godzilla suit with a frilly collar. What mattered to fans forty years ago—and, most likely, what matters now—is not the quality of the special effects, but how well they took a beating from Ultraman, and that particular aspect remains a rock-em-sock-em guilty pleasure in all of the 39 episodes collected here. The Mill Creek set is the same as the BCI/Eclipse release from 2006, sans interviews with the English-language vocal cast. **Paul Gaita**

Star Trek: The Next Generation Motion Picture Collection

Studio: Paramount

Following the successful release of J.J. Abrams' relaunch film and the high-def *Original Motion Picture Collection* box set, Paramount is continuing their year of Trek with the release of the Next Generation films on Blu-ray. Unfortunately, this five-disc collection may be the official test of fans appetites for the franchise, since it not only features two of the worst installments in the series cinematic history, but fails to offer enough substance to make their re-evaluation worthwhile. In particular, both Nemesis and Insurrection remain awful movies, but vaguely reflective new extras, such as Jonathan Frakes and Marina Sirtis' absent-minded commentary on the latter, do the movie no favors. But as a whole, one s interest in this set will come down to which iteration of the Trek saga satisfies you the most, which means that the Next Generation may not be the next one you need to buy. **Todd Gilchrist**

Gojira

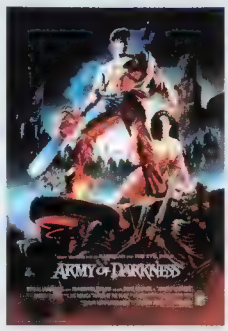
Studio: Classic Media

Far removed from the nihilistic destruction of later installments in this decades-old franchise, the original *Gojira* is a devastating look at post-WWII Japan in the guise of a monster movie. Looking as fantastic as the source material will allow via a new high-definition transfer, director Ishiro Honda's classic follows two tormented scientists who try to figure out how to stop a prehistoric sea creature after it lays waste to the Japanese coastline. Meanwhile, the commentary track—a holdover from the 2006 standard-def release—is amazingly informative, and enhances the viewing experience with both character and cultural details likely to be missed by modern audiences. But as the progenitor of a film series that subsequently descended into colossal camp, *Gojira* is a truly great film thanks to uniformly great performances from the cast, surprisingly terrific special effects, and its powerful political subtext. A must-have Blu-ray for any burgeoning collection. **Todd Gilchrist**

Army of Darkness Screwhead Edition

Studio: Universal

Given the number of different cuts and alternate versions DVD distributors produced over the years, fans may never see a truly definitive home-video release of Sam Raimi's *Army of Darkness*. But Universal's new "Screwhead Edition" does a pretty good job of combining priority extras with high-definition presentation of the theatrical cut, making this a straightforward but satisfying new Blu-ray. As always, the movie itself is a madcap adventure laced with more references to the Three Stooges than the previous two *Evil Dead* movies, but Campbell's performance as Ash is still inspired, especially in HD, where his arrogant stupidity borders on beautiful. Meanwhile, an in-depth featurette looks back at the film's surprisingly varied special effects. But while completists will bemoan the absence of earlier editions' extras, this is a surprisingly effective set—even if we hope it's a stopgap for something more substantial down the line. **Todd Gilchrist**



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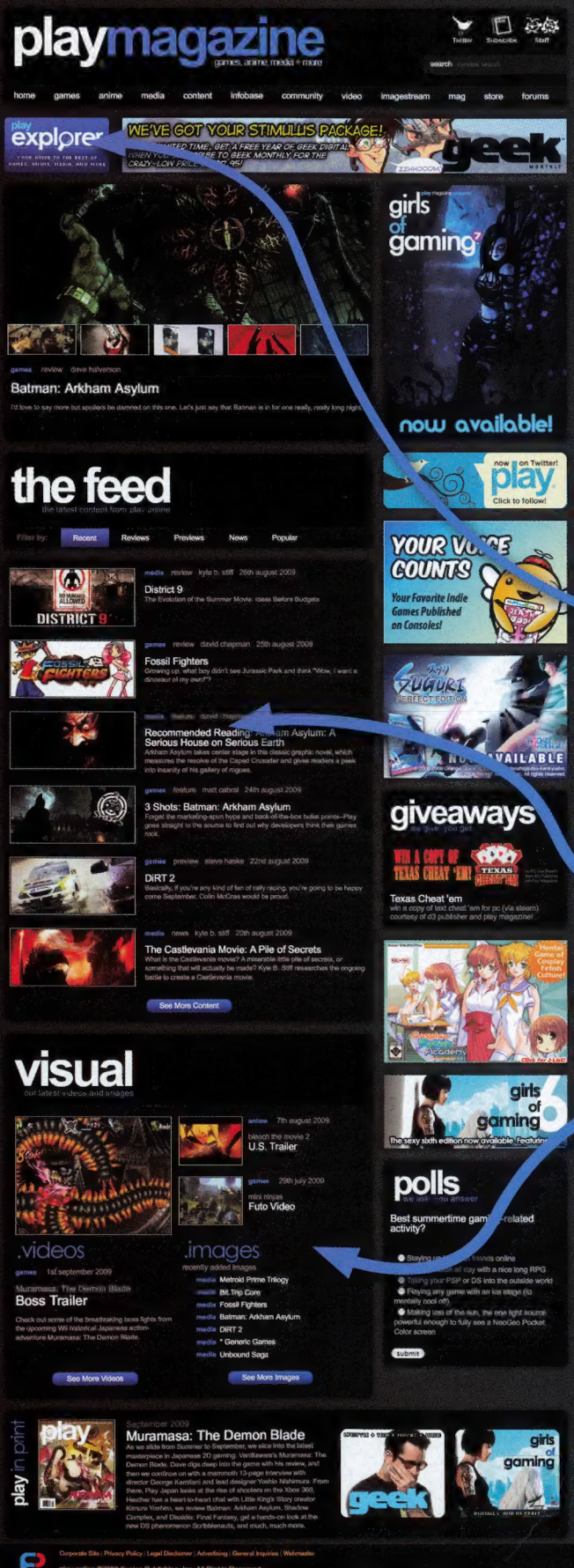

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Here's a small sample of what you'll find on the new **play** online:

explorer

Find your way in a sea of confusion with the **play** online explorer, our revolutionary new section that guides you to only the best of what's out there. You don't have the chance to check out everything there is to see what's worth your time and what isn't; let the experts at **play** be your guides to the best of the best.

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the feed

A sampling of the exclusive content recently featured on **play** online

The Castlevania Movie: A Pile of Secrets

What is the Castlevania movie? A miserable little pile of secrets, or something that will actually be made? Kyle B. Stiff researches the ongoing battle to create a Castlevania movie. (search: "castlevania movie")

Recommended Reading

David Chapman brings you his weekly report on the best titles hitting your local comic shop. (search: "recommended reading")

3 Shots: Batman: Arkham Asylum

Forget the marketing-spun hype and back-of-the-box bullet points--Play goes straight to the source to find out why developers think their games rock. (search: "3 shots")

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BACK OF THE BOOK

11_09 Kyle B. Stiff
Online Editor

I Want the Blood of Heroes!

My name is Kyle B. Stiff. I come from the future.

I was just a little kid when the "stories in video games" debate really blew up. In 2015 the Anti-Story division effectively won the debate. First they tricked us, then they bullied us. Then came the bonfires, piles and piles of games with strong narratives thrown into the fires. But we had good reason to go along: Every video game that came out in 2014 had a storyline so incredibly stupid that it no longer seemed like human beings had any part in writing the scripts—it was more like a room full of monkeys banging away on word processors on the off chance that *Macbeth* or *Seven Samurai* might come out.

For a decade we were story-free. No more annoying Japanese RPG tropes, no more Western shooters with tough guy clones who find out that "everything they believed in was a lie," no more thinking you'll get to choose between good and evil and then getting shoehorned into choosing good because evil just seems too unrealistic. Our games were lights, sounds, arbitrary goals, manipulation of abstract environments. Our most popular game was called *Light Box Excuse Me Please!!!!!*, which carried the frantic description, "Can you make it glow red in less than four seconds?!" I can't say whether it was fun or not because I never bothered to play it.

After video games were relegated to something to do while stuck in traffic, the Anti-Story movement became lax.

After video games were relegated to something to do while stuck in traffic, the Anti-Story movement became lax. A game called *The Odyssey* was made. It was marketed as an educational tool, something to help high school kids understand ancient literature; a necessary ruse to have a story-driven game green lit. It was about Odysseus and his long journey home from the Trojan War. The gods opposed him and he had to fight a horde of misshapen beasts using brute strength and nauseatingly violent finishing moves. There were tactical elements as well, as Odysseus had a crew of goons to back him up. And role-playing dialogue too, in which the player controlled Penelope, Odysseus's wife, as she devised plots to delay a horde of suitors from claiming her husband's vast estate.

Damn, we loved it! The final scene was vilified in mainstream news because, just as in the original tale, Odysseus and his son round up Penelope's unhelpful servants, take them behind some building, and slaughter them. Many child psychology experts, themselves comically out of touch with reality, stated that that scene alone must have produced a dozen future psychopaths. But we didn't love *The Odyssey* because it was ultraviolent, we loved it because it made us feel powerful, **heroic**, like we were on a meaningful journey towards a goal rather than slogging from one day to the next.

We needed that ritualized violence, that cleansing blood, that spiritual journey through Hell. Sorting boxes of light and pushing icons through mazes doesn't wake the soul like a symbolic quest for revenge that ends by seeing your enemy's forehead caved in, all of it played out in a medium where no one gets hurt.

In ages past, cultures changed at the speed of an uphill slug race. You could fill the same niche as your great grandfather, find meaning through tradition, and maybe take part in a few explosive rituals every year to help sort through the baggage a soul accumulates. But things move fast now and society needs us to be literal and objective, to keep the beast penned up, or else everything will fall apart. You can't stand up to the bad guys and take them out in real life because... well, they make you go to prison if you do.

Of course, in the future that I come from, the stuffed suits got it wrong once again. They misunderstood the appeal of violent heroism and started marketing things as "dark" and "edgy." That's how we got *Tetris Torture*, a game about stuffing your victims into a cramped, dimly-lit soundproof chamber before the cops bust down your door for an impromptu inspection. It didn't do so well, nor did any of the shameless copies of *The Odyssey*. But the stuffed suits refused to budge an inch regarding their policy of not working with creative script writers who have the backbone to take risks. Instead, they stand ready to declare yet another "death of storytelling" in video gaming.

That's why I've come back: To stand alongside those who demand better narratives than what we're getting. But it's a tricky task. We can't demand "good writers" because the suits don't know what that means—they'll think we're talking about a writer that makes a lot of money, which doesn't mean anything. No, we need script writers willing to take risks.

No compelling video game narrative was ever made by a writer who had his guts clenched up in fear. As with a lot of things in life, **heroic bravery** is what's needed. play

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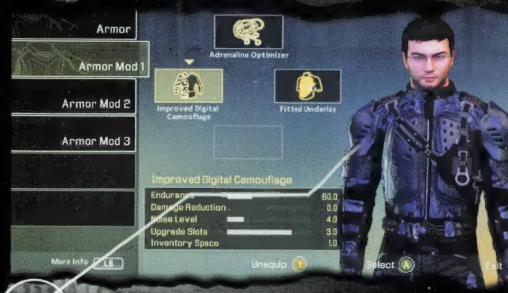

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